
Science in Democracy

Expertise, Institutions, and Representation

Mark B. Brown

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

© 2009 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information about special quantity discounts, please email special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu

This book was set in Sabon by Westchester Book Composition.
Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brown, Mark B.

Science in democracy : expertise, institutions, and representation / Mark B. Brown.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01324-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-262-51304-3 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Science—Political aspects. 2. Science and state. 3. Science and state—Citizen participation. 4. Representative government and representation. 5. Democracy. I. Title.

Q175.5.B759 2009

320.01—dc22

2009005952

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1

Niccolò Machiavelli and the Popular Politics of Expertise

A prince who is not wise on his own cannot be well advised.

—Machiavelli, *The Prince*

The few always act in the interest of the few.

—Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*

The chairman of the U.S. President’s Council on Bioethics, Edmund Pellegrino, distinguishes two forms of politicized science: the first he associates with the Aristotelian pursuit of the good life, the second with the Machiavellian pursuit of self-interest. Politics of “the Machiavellian variety,” he writes, aims to promote “the selfish interests of groups or individuals or to prevent open discussion of opposing viewpoints.” It employs “free assertion, seductive one-sided argument, partial or distorted evidence, bombast.”¹ Posed in these terms, Machiavellian politics clearly threatens both science and democracy. Leading science studies scholar Bruno Latour has repeatedly adopted a similar if somewhat more nuanced reading of Machiavelli, enlisting the Florentine in support of a view of science as strategic alliance building. As I explain in chapter 7, Latour portrays the establishment of scientific facts as a matter of enrolling supporters for scientific claims. For Latour, Machiavelli stands for the clever pursuit of epistemic power in an ever-changing world, where social values and scientific facts must be continually reestablished.²

This chapter offers a different reading of Machiavelli, more conducive to a democratic theory of science than either Pellegrino’s or Latour’s. Machiavelli not only embraces the contingency and flux of modern politics. He also highlights the importance of stable institutions that help citizens cope with shifting events. Moreover, he helps establish the basic conceptual framework for the modern idea of representation as correspondence

in science, even as he suggests some key elements of a republican form of representation in politics. My account thus departs from the many recent studies that emphasize Machiavelli's republicanism and discount his contributions to the basic worldview of modern science.³ Conversely, my reading also differs from the many interpretations that neglect Machiavelli's republicanism and associate him with a disenchanted modern scientific worldview characterized by the egoistic pursuit of power, where government is merely "the technique of management."⁴ By assuming that Machiavelli must be read as either a republican or a scientist, each of these established readings begs the question. They assume the very opposition between science and politics that Machiavelli helped create. This chapter shows, in contrast, that some of Machiavelli's basic convictions—realism, instrumentalism, voluntarism, the rule of law, and faith in the competence of ordinary citizens—set the stage for *both* modern science and modern republicanism. More precisely, Machiavelli articulates distinct norms and purposes for science advisors and political actors—thus hinting at the institutional differentiation of modern society—and he also offers an account of how and why science should serve politics rather than the other way around. Machiavelli cannot be captured within a single interpretive principle—republicanism or scientism—because he is doing two things at once: inventing a modern rhetoric of expertise, and showing how to use expertise in a way that goes beyond short-term success and enhances the power and security of a principality or republic. Finally, this chapter identifies echoes of Machiavelli's thought in both liberal theories of representative government and more participatory forms of representative democracy.

Machiavelli's Rhetoric of Expertise

Machiavelli wrote both within and against the *speculum principis* or mirror-for-princes literature, a genre of texts that advised princes how to govern. Beginning in the early medieval period, hundreds of such texts discussed the same basic themes: the relation of kings to their counselors; how to avoid flatterers; whether a king is above the law; the king's duties to his subjects; whether it is better to be feared or loved; and the merits of a native militia as compared to mercenary troops. Authors writing in this genre made flexible use of anecdotes and platitudes taken from ancient texts to provide both advice and propaganda for the rulers they served.⁵ During the fifteenth century, accompanied by a new apprecia-

tion for the historically specific circumstances of ancient texts, elements of the mirror-for-princes genre came together in various strands of Renaissance humanism.⁶

In comparison to other authors in the mirror-for-princes genre, commentators have usually seen Machiavelli's originality in his "realistic" doctrine of politics.⁷ Whereas most other advisors told princes how to be virtuous, Machiavelli showed them how to retain power. Although Machiavelli certainly advocates political realism over idealism, his realism is itself an ideal, requiring appropriate doses of bold imagination, and Machiavelli's defense of his ideal is no less rhetorical than the most elaborate prose of his contemporaries.⁸

Drawing on established rhetorical conventions, Machiavelli opens *The Prince* with a few passages designed to awaken the interest and sympathy of his first intended reader, Lorenzo de' Medici, to whom the book is dedicated.⁹ The Medici ruled Florence during most of the fifteenth century but had been forced into exile during the revival of the Republic, which lasted from 1494 until the Medici regained power in 1512. Machiavelli served in the Second Chancery of the Florentine Republic from 1498 to 1512, often engaged in diplomatic missions in which he was able to observe and converse with the leading political figures of the age. When the Medici returned to power, Machiavelli was arrested and tortured on suspicion of having conspired against them. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in the fall of 1513, while living outside Florence, involuntarily exiled from politics and hoping to acquire a position in the new government.

This background, as well as Machiavelli's lack of noble status, made it especially important for Machiavelli to ingratiate himself with his audience. He thus opens *The Prince* by drawing a parallel between his book and other immediately useful or status-conferring gifts commonly given to princes: "horses, arms, and vestments of gold cloth, precious stones, and similar ornaments suited to their greatness." He goes on to explain that he has condensed "knowledge of the deeds of great men" acquired through "long experience in modern affairs and a continuous study of antiquity" into "a little book." In a manner similar to the seventeenth-century experimental scientists discussed in the next chapter, Machiavelli locates the value of his gift in the way it transforms work into knowledge. Like a scientific proposition based on a series of laboratory experiments, Machiavelli's book allows the prince to understand "in a very short time" everything that Machiavelli has learned "in so many years

and with so many hardships and dangers.”¹⁰ By thus emphasizing the practical usefulness of his advice, Machiavelli also echoes the long tradition of the mirror-for-princes literature.

Machiavelli departs from the tradition, however, in his emphasis on the time-saving efficiency provided by his text.¹¹ Whereas other humanist advice books had usually confined themselves to offering a series of maxims, commonplaces, and proverbs that the reader could draw upon in making decisions, Machiavelli offers a finished product of condensed knowledge. The reader will not need to engage in further deliberations, using the text as an aid, for the work has already been done. As Michael Oakeshott emphasizes, Machiavelli writes especially for the new prince of his day who needs a cheat-sheet to compensate for lack of experience.¹² In this respect, the rationalist politics to which Machiavelli contributes favors upstarts and newcomers over veterans of public affairs—a dynamic apparent in the United States today with the symbiotic rise of campaign consultants and celebrity politicians at the expense of established political parties.

Machiavelli also differs from other humanist authors, and suggests the rhetoric of modern science, when he denounces the same rhetorical techniques that he uses to such great effect. Immediately following the passages quoted previously, Machiavelli writes that he has “neither decorated nor filled this work with elaborate sentences, with rich and magnificent words, or with any other form of rhetorical or unnecessary ornamentation . . . for I wished that nothing should set my work apart or make it pleasing except the variety and gravity of its contents.”¹³ Whereas previous authors in the mirror-for-princes genre had explicitly used rhetoric and persuasion to tell princes how and why they should try to be virtuous, Machiavelli here suggests that advice based on normative ideals will weaken the prince. Only realistic and descriptive advice will strengthen him. Good advice, Machiavelli suggests, is about what is, not what ought to be. It is not surprising that passages such as this remind today’s readers of the modern scientific ethos, and I will discuss similar passages in the writings of seventeenth-century experimental scientists. But there is more going on here than a simple endorsement of scientific objectivity.

In these passages, as Robert Hariman has argued, Machiavelli draws a distinction between the language of his text and its content, between rhetoric and knowledge.¹⁴ In saying that he will use plain language and not flatter the prince or beautify things, Machiavelli is distinguishing his approach from the flowery rhetoric common in the mirror-for-princes

genre. But rather than avoiding all convention and rhetoric, Machiavelli is creating a new rhetorical convention in which the author is absent from the text and the text is independent of social conventions. Machiavelli's text reveals only its subject matter, not the author. The author is of course not entirely absent, but he positions himself as a transparent medium between the reader and the subject matter. Machiavelli is not actively *representing* the world; he is creating *representations* of the world. He is not speaking; the facts are speaking through him. Like the carefully worded laboratory reports discussed in the next chapter, Machiavelli employs a rhetoric of humility to retreat behind the method by which he induces his subject matter to speak.

This emphasis on method appears most clearly when Machiavelli expresses his hope that someone of such "low and inferior social condition" as himself will not be thought presumptuous for daring to "examine and lay down rules" for princes. His objective social location, Machiavelli suggests, rather than anything particular to him as an individual, gives him the capacity to produce true and useful knowledge about politics: "Just as those who paint landscapes place themselves in a low position on the plain in order to consider the nature of the mountains and the heights, and place themselves high on top of mountains in order to study the plains, in like manner, to know the nature of the people well one must be a prince, and to know the nature of princes well one must be of the people."¹⁵ Machiavelli here justifies his daring to speak to those of higher station by equating his social location with an epistemological location, thus objectifying what he had said previously about his personal qualifications and experience. He associates his capacity to provide useful knowledge not with personal virtue or effort or intellectual capacity but with the adoption of a particular perspective. Moreover, he explicitly presents himself not as an author who creates a new written work but as an observer who records preexisting phenomena.¹⁶ And by highlighting his "low and inferior social condition," Machiavelli suggests that the perspective of observer is open to nearly everyone. Machiavelli thus presents his book as a distinctly public form of knowledge, a legitimation strategy that later becomes central to modern science.

At the same time, however, as he also gives an account of the prince's perspective, Machiavelli suggests that he not only observes the prince from below but alternates between one perspective and the other.¹⁷ In this respect, Machiavelli's epistemological humility not only legitimates his claim to knowledge but also threatens to delegitimize political authority.

If anyone can acquire knowledge of princely affairs, the prince may have trouble maintaining authority over his subjects.¹⁸ In this respect, the epistemic authority of Machiavelli's political science, like that of scientific experts today, has the potential to either underwrite or undermine political authority.

Machiavelli's rhetoric of humility is even more pronounced in the preface to the autograph manuscript of his *Discourses on Livy*. He writes, "Even if my feeble intellect, my meager experience in current affairs, and my weak knowledge of ancient ones render this effort of mine defective and of little use, it may at least open the way for someone who with more ability, more eloquence, and more judgment will be able to carry out this plan of mine."¹⁹ In this passage and many others, the author retreats not only behind his own individual text but also behind a historically progressive social enterprise of knowledge production. Regardless of Machiavelli's individual success, he hopes to "open the way" for others. This notion later plays a key role in the public legitimation of modern science.

In addition to removing himself from his text, Machiavelli also removes the text from society. This is most apparent in his well-known December 10, 1513, letter to Francesco Vettori, in which Machiavelli describes daily life at his country villa outside Florence. He has been banished from politics and is reluctantly engaged in mundane pursuits, he writes, tending to his property and socializing with the locals.

When evening comes, I return to my home, and I go into my study; and on the threshold, I take off my everyday clothes, which are covered with mud and mire and I put on regal and curial robes; and dressed in a more appropriate manner I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men and am welcomed by them kindly, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born; and there I am not ashamed to speak to them, to ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in their humanity, answer me; and for four hours I feel no boredom, I dismiss every affliction, I no longer fear poverty nor do I tremble at the thought of death: I become completely part of them.²⁰

This often-quoted passage is usually read as a romantic statement of the humanist commitment to intellectual inquiry and the cross-generational "conversation" of political theory.²¹ It also suggests an epistemology in which acquiring knowledge requires a departure from both the domestic concerns of the home (Machiavelli works in his study, not at the kitchen table), and the social world of everyday conventions. Machiavelli here faces the same problem of speaking to superiors with which he opens *The Prince*. In the letter to Vettori, Machiavelli adopts the conventions

he rejects in the dedicatory letter of *The Prince*, and he dresses himself in a manner appropriate to “the ancient courts of ancient men.” But in both texts Machiavelli asserts a divide between language and politics.²² In the letter, when entering his study Machiavelli moves from day to night, from public life to (a male version of) private life, from the poverty and fear of death he shares with others to the individual solace of an ephemeral “food that alone is mine.” By thus removing himself from society, Machiavelli acquires an outsider’s perspective, analogous to observing the prince from the plains. Whereas other authors in the mirror-for-princes genre explicitly identified themselves with social and rhetorical conventions familiar to their readers, Machiavelli creates a rhetoric of distance. As I discuss in detail later, this sort of distance is a basic precondition for modern theories of representation.

In addition to these challenges to the mirror-for-princes genre and the prevailing conception of political advice, Machiavelli also suggests a new understanding of the advisor’s subject matter: political power. Machiavelli is often credited with discovering the primacy of power in politics. This may be true, but as Hariman points out, more significant is that Machiavelli also helps establish the very notion that power is an object of discovery, an entity existing outside of human conventions, a thing that one can have.²³ In terms of a distinction developed by Hannah Arendt, Machiavelli conceives power as force, a measurable capacity to compel obedience; other authors in the mirror-for-princes genre view power in a manner similar to Arendt’s notion of power as a potential for action that arises from the shared life of a community.²⁴ They conceive power as manifest in social relations, embedded in a cultural context and exercised primarily through persuasive speech. When they seek to assert power over those they advise, they reproduce this conception of power by explicitly relying on artful persuasion, past authorities, and shared ideals. For these authors, citing previous authorities is not only a rhetorical technique but also the enactment of an epistemology grounded in shared language and history. Machiavelli’s *Prince*, in contrast, directly cites only two other authors: Virgil in chapter 17 and Petrarch in chapter 26.²⁵ Indeed, despite adhering in many respects to established rhetorical conventions, Machiavelli announces that his study of power will avoid artifice, reject authorities, and defy conventions. He thus defines power as external to language and convention, and he thereby also redefines language and convention as impotent to guide power—without the aid, that is, of expert advice.

Although Machiavelli's redefinition of power as an object of study depends on the author removing himself from his text, it also makes Machiavelli himself indispensable to the wise exercise and control of power so conceived. By separating language and power, Machiavelli insinuates himself as a necessary mediator between the language of the classical texts he interprets and the power of the prince. This is the rhetorical stance of the modern expert, whose knowledge is deemed indispensable to politics, not least because everyone assumes political actors have power but lack knowledge. In this respect, Machiavelli's *Prince* not only depicts a world that requires princes to assert themselves; it is also the author's own self-assertion against the conventions of the genre. Machiavelli presents himself as the person who can link together what his text breaks apart: text and context, knowledge and convention, science and politics.²⁶

Paradoxically, the separation of knowledge and convention makes knowledge more useful for controlling the world of convention. This idea appears most clearly in chapter 15 of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli again writes (again with false humility) that he fears being considered presumptuous for the way he departs from convention. He then continues, "But since my intention is to write something useful for anyone who understands it, it seemed more suitable for me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one. Many writers have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality."²⁷ Put simply, knowledge of reality is useful, and imagination is useless. Machiavelli famously goes on to argue that when the security of the state is at risk, useful knowledge may conflict with conventional morality. "For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation."²⁸ Machiavelli thus again draws a divide between truth and utility on the one hand, and convention on the other. True knowledge is useful, and useful knowledge is true, and both may defy convention. This does not mean that social conventions should be ignored, for both princes and experts must strive to remain relevant to the conventional world, but linking knowledge and power requires a willingness to reject convention.²⁹ In this respect, as I show in the next chapter, Machiavelli's rhetoric reappears in the modern expert's ambiguous relationship to common sense.

Contingency, Expertise, and Visual Politics

If Machiavelli's division between knowledge and convention helps establish the power of the modern expert, his view of politics as inevitably shaped by unpredictable events challenges that power. Through their engagement with the classical texts of ancient Greece and Rome, fifteenth-century humanists had developed a new historical consciousness, a sense that their time was different from the past. Machiavelli reflects this historical sensibility when he emphasizes the precariousness of any effort to apply knowledge to politics. In this respect, he offers some hints for coping with the dilemmas created by the conception of expertise that Machiavelli himself did so much to create. If Machiavelli's epistemology asserts an external standpoint from which to control political affairs, his political theory offers conceptual resources for democratizing that standpoint, such that ordinary citizens play a role in the constitution of political advice.

In contrast to the early humanist reliance on ancient works of philosophy, Machiavelli focuses on the works of Livy and other ancient historians. He derives his generalizations from history and from his own experience, rather than from abstract principles. In the preface to the *Discourses*, Machiavelli laments that whereas sculptors, jurists, and doctors use past examples to develop rules for current practice, in political affairs past examples of virtuous conduct "are praised with astonishment rather than imitated."³⁰ He asserts that "all the sciences require experience in order to master them completely," leading to his recommendation that commanders of armies should learn to hunt when young, because hunting provides useful knowledge and experience, as well as the skills for acquiring additional relevant knowledge in the future.³¹ As Oakeshott points out, it is only Machiavelli's presumptive followers who believe technical advice can be useful without practical experience.³² Machiavelli himself knew they depend on each other.

Not only should political leaders develop knowledge through engagement with concrete historical contexts, they should use their knowledge with specific reference to the changing contexts in which it is applied. All assessments of political events and personages are inconclusive and none are final. The world is always changing, interpreters bring their own biases, and there is no final judge.³³ Ancient and medieval philosophers had also seen the earthly world as constantly changing, but they understood earthly change in light of the unchanging perfection of the heavens.

Change was thus something to be minimized, if not eliminated. Machiavelli, in contrast, seeks to understand the constant flux of earthly life on its own terms, without subordinating it to a changeless realm of religious or moral truth. And where seventeenth-century scientists would magnify their power to control events by redefining nature as inert matter in motion, Machiavelli believes that occult forces often undo human plans. He refers often to “the power of heaven in human affairs,” noting that “things frequently arise and incidents occur against which the heavens have not wished any provision to be made.”³⁴

Machiavelli’s appreciation for the contingency of human experience also appears in his view that it is impossible to have all the conventional virtues, “because the human condition does not permit it.” And even if people think they are acting according to virtue, the results of their actions may tell a different story. This is the irony of politics: “something which appears to be a virtue, if pursued, will result in his ruin; while some other thing which seems to be a vice, if pursued, will secure his safety and well being.”³⁵ In this respect, political action always contains the potential for tragedy: “in the desire to bring something to a perfect conclusion, there is always some evil very near this good which arises so easily along with it that it seems impossible to avoid the one while wanting the other.”³⁶ Eschewing what John Dewey would later call “the quest for certainty,” and what Isaiah Berlin would reject as the “ancient faith” in the basic compatibility of all values, Machiavelli argues that in politics one must always choose the least bad alternative: “an option that is completely clear and completely without uncertainty cannot be found,” and “one can never cancel one disadvantage without another arising from it.”³⁷ It is thus a mistake to read Machiavelli as advocating an immoral or amoral view of politics. His point is rather that moral criteria have to be politically established.

In a similar vein, and in contrast to fifteenth-century humanists who praised civic unity, Machiavelli argues that class conflict leads to good laws, civic liberty, territorial expansion, and hence to republican glory.³⁸ Where the humanists saw class division as a threat to political stability, Machiavelli argues that Rome achieved greatness not in spite of its internal divisions and lack of stability but because of them. He thus also departs, as John McCormick has argued, from contemporary democratic theorists who idealize deliberative consensus.³⁹ Indeed, Machiavelli’s *Discourses* cast Rome as the “new prince” among republics, continually disrupting established conventions. He argues that Rome could have pre-

vented its internal conflicts only at the price of eliminating the key cause of its expansion and empire, and hence its greatness. Although in theory a republic might achieve perfect balance among its internal factions and between itself and other states, in practice “human affairs are in continual motion and cannot remain fixed,” leading all states to go through cycles of rise and decline.⁴⁰ The impermanence of all governments makes legitimacy into a continual process rather than a substantive attribute of any particular regime. In this respect, Machiavelli suggests the perils of relying too heavily on technical expertise to provide fixed substantive standards for politics.

Machiavelli’s prescription for harnessing change and delaying the inevitable decline of states rests in part on his much discussed concept of *virtù* or manly assertiveness. Although Machiavelli’s praise for decisive action is well known, it is important to remember that in discussing *virtù* Machiavelli confronts a paradox. On one hand, he notoriously insists that “it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortune is a woman, and if you want to keep her under it is necessary to beat her and force her down.”⁴¹ On the other hand, Machiavelli also makes clear that the key factor in political success is not the particular approach adopted but whether the approach fits the times. In some contexts, an impetuous prince will be successful; in others, a cautious one. One’s approach is shaped by one’s character, so the best would be if one could continually adapt one’s character to the times—but this, Machiavelli asserts, is impossible.⁴² It seems that, when in doubt, assertiveness is usually the better bet, but the most one can expect is occasional and temporary success.⁴³ For this reason, Machiavelli implicitly rejects both optimism and pessimism, each of which assumes a capacity to predict the future. But throughout his writings Machiavelli calls for hope and perseverance, most notably in a moving passage in the *Discourses*: “Men can side with fortune but not oppose her; they can weave her warp but they cannot tear it apart. They must never give up, for without knowing her goals as she moves along paths both crossed and unknown, men always have to hope, and with hope, they should never give up, no matter what the situation or the difficulty in which they find themselves.”⁴⁴ It seems that Machiavellian *virtù* lies not simply in bold assertiveness but in perseverance. Hope and perseverance provide a way of coping with the paradox that success requires acting boldly, as if success were likely, while also recognizing that fortune may turn against you at any time. If Machiavelli creates the rhetorical style of the modern expert, he also highlights the contingencies of

human life that inevitably frustrate those who reduce politics to the mechanical implementation of either moral or technical expertise.

Machiavelli does think it possible for expertise to improve politics, but only when it is organized through politics. If the prince has too many advisors, Machiavelli argues, and if they advise him on all possible matters at their own discretion, he will lose their respect. He will also have difficulty choosing among their conflicting recommendations, and he will inadvertently place his advisors in competition with each other, which makes it likely that their advice will reflect their own interests rather than the prince's. Instead, Machiavelli says, the prince must select a limited number of advisors and allow them to speak to him only regarding the questions he asks. The prince should ask questions frequently, but he should make decisions on his own and stick to them. For these reasons, Machiavelli notes, "a prince who is not wise on his own cannot be well advised," and "good advice, from whomever it may come, must arise from the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince from good advice."⁴⁵ Here Machiavelli asserts the institutional priority of politics over expertise. The prince should do what he can to ensure the production and delivery of the best advice possible, but expert advice must always serve the ends of politics rather than the other way around. Whereas other authors in the mirror-for-princes genre had recommended the direct application of fixed lessons derived from past exemplars, Machiavelli's advice focuses on the intellectual, ethical, and institutional preconditions for using advice successfully.

Here we encounter something of a paradox, as Eugene Garver points out, because Machiavelli's stated purpose in writing *The Prince* is to get a job as expert advisor with the Medici, but he seems to undercut that purpose with his subordination of experts to princes.⁴⁶ The paradox makes sense, however, once we see that Machiavelli is offering much more than a didactic lecture on how to be a successful prince. A lecture of that sort would merely replace the traditional moral authorities Machiavelli ridicules with himself as a new authority. It would also contradict his critique of those who live according to theories (including his own) about how the world ought to be.⁴⁷ So rather than setting himself up as a new expert authority, Machiavelli enacts his lesson through his book. On the surface, that is, Machiavelli's advice consists of the injunction to imitate rather than merely admire the great deeds of past rulers. But Machiavelli repeatedly suggests that his various exemplars of past success do not themselves show how to relate past exemplars to current

situations. Successful rulers of the past did not simply copy each other, and a prince who attempted to mechanically repeat their actions would fail to recognize that their success rested not merely on what they did but on how they adjusted their actions to their circumstances. A prince should not copy historical exemplars but use them as resources for innovative thought and action. He should, Machiavelli writes, “take from Severus those qualities that are necessary to found his state, and from Marcus those that are suitable and glorious in order to conserve a state that is already established and stable.”⁴⁸ In this respect, as Garver argues, Machiavelli aims for the prince to imitate not the great deeds from the past he relates, but his argument itself.⁴⁹

More generally, both the content and form of Machiavelli’s argument suggest that direct, unmediated claims to authority—whether those of hereditary princes, moralistic leaders, or technocratic experts—are less reliable than efforts to generate authority by empowering and inspiring those whose recognition and assistance one seeks, while being careful to not become dependent upon them. Machiavelli thus insists on a native militia over both mercenary and borrowed troops, because either the latter will be reluctant to fight, or if they do fight and win, they will become ambitious and threaten the prince.⁵⁰ Similarly, Machiavelli explains that the prince should inspire the people’s loyalty not by seeking their love and approval, but by enhancing the glory of the state, because “friendships acquired by a prince and not by greatness and nobility are purchased and not owned.”⁵¹ And when it comes to ministers and advisors, a prince must both “recognize their capacities” and “keep them loyal.” Princes must give ministers and advisors “a share of the honors and responsibilities,” so that their interests will become aligned with the prince’s.⁵² In sum, with regard to the military, citizens, and experts, the prince can best increase his power by empowering his supporters.⁵³

In addition to cultivating the *virtù* of both princes and citizens, and ensuring that expertise fits the needs of political actors, Machiavelli urges his readers to cope with the contingencies of politics by focusing on the visible consequences of political action. Commentators often see a realist cynicism in Machiavelli’s discussion of appearance and reality. The prince, Machiavelli notoriously says, must appear to have conventional virtues but must not really have them.⁵⁴ Cynical as this may sound, such passages acquire a richer meaning when read in light of Machiavelli’s contrast between visible and invisible grounds of political judgment. Whereas instrumental results are potentially open to evaluation by all citizens, the

motives and intentions of political actors are not. Seen from this perspective, Machiavelli's focus on appearances is not born of cynicism but of a recognition that in the turbulent context of Renaissance Florence his contemporaries lack shared standards of judgment. Machiavelli writes, "In the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no tribunal to which to appeal, one must consider the final result. . . . For ordinary people are always taken in by appearances and by the outcome of an event. And in the world there are only ordinary people; and the few have no place, while the many have a spot on which to lean."⁵⁵ In this fascinating passage, Machiavelli both criticizes and affirms a world in which "there are only ordinary people" who are "always taken in by appearances." In such a world, where traditional authorities have lost their place, instrumental effectiveness offers a recognizable standard of judgment. Assessments of instrumental effectiveness are relatively easy to conduct and to agree upon with others, Machiavelli suggests, because they can be made with regard to visible effects rather than invisible intentions or motives. Just as one should seek models of virtue by looking not within the self, nor up into the heavens, but outward at the great deeds of one's ancestors, one should assess the consequences of political decisions by their publicly visible results.⁵⁶

Machiavelli applies a similar logic to one of the standard questions of the mirror-for-princes genre: is it better for the prince to be feared or loved? Machiavelli's answer is that it is best to be both feared and loved, and a prince must always avoid being hated; but when it is impossible to be both, it is better to be feared than loved, "since men love at their own pleasure and fear at the pleasure of the prince." Whereas fear depends on external relations of threat and coercion, "love is held together by a chain of obligation that, since men are a wretched lot, is broken on every occasion for their own self-interest; but fear is sustained by a dread of punishment that will never abandon you."⁵⁷ In a fragmented society of "ordinary people," it is prudent to rely on visible threats rather than invisible love.

Finally, the same logic of appearances appears once again in Machiavelli's emphasis on the importance of public spectacles in establishing the prince's authority. He tells the story of how Cesare Borgia created order in the Romagna by giving the "cruel and unscrupulous" Remirro de Orco full authority to govern the province. Once Remirro had brutally established order, in the process arousing the hatred of the populace, Borgia took a spectacular step to prevent the people's hatred from being

transferred to himself: “one morning at Cesena he had Messer Remirro’s body laid out in two pieces on the piazza, with a block of wood and a bloody sword beside it.” The spectacle “left the population satisfied and stupefied at the same time.”⁵⁸ This concern with the visual language of politics, a key feature of Renaissance culture, later becomes central to the rhetoric of both modern science and liberal democracy. As I show in subsequent chapters, a similar politics of vision underwrites the image of the liberal-democratic citizen as a silent witness to the instrumental performance of representative government; and it appears in the seventeenth-century experimental scientist’s self-presentation as a humble witness of public experiments.⁵⁹

Not everyone makes judgments based on appearances, of course, and Machiavelli claims for himself a capacity to see beneath the appearances. “Men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands: everyone can see, but few can feel. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are.”⁶⁰ The implication here is that Machiavelli, as one of “the few,” can not only “see” but also “touch” the prince. These considerations expand on Machiavelli’s comments in the dedicatory letter to *The Prince*, in which he relied on the visual metaphor of observing the prince on the mountaintop from the perspective of the plains. In contrast to that earlier formulation, Machiavelli says here that he uses both sight and touch in evaluating the prince. His point, it seems, is that the expert relies on both “touching” and “seeing” his subject matter—that is, both close engagement with and detachment from the prince—but citizens can be expected to judge the prince’s actions with their eyes alone. Indeed, in his analyses of historical personages, and also in his reports on the various princes and despots he encountered during his time as a diplomat, Machiavelli assesses both characters and consequences, both motives and outcomes. Expert advisors have to look behind the scenes and avoid falling prey to the tricks and deceptions that rulers employ against both their own citizens and those who attempt to understand them.⁶¹

Republican Institutions and Popular Engagement

Despite Machiavelli’s emphasis on the *virtú* of individuals, he also suggests that a key task for expert advisors is to design laws and institutions that help both leaders and citizens cope with the contingencies of politics. In this respect, Machiavelli offers an instructive perspective on some of the issues confronting contemporary efforts to mediate conflicts

between and among laypeople and experts. He also challenges both political theory and the social studies of science to devote more attention to questions of institutional design.

Some strands of republicanism, both in Machiavelli's time and today, emphasize the civic virtue of individual citizens as the key to a healthy and vibrant republic. Similarly, much contemporary scholarship in bioethics and research ethics focuses on the moral dilemmas confronting individuals. Although Machiavelli certainly believes that civic virtue is important, he argues repeatedly that it can thrive only in a context of republican institutions: "men never do good except out of necessity, but where choices are abundant and unlimited freedom is the norm, everything immediately becomes confused and disorderly. Hence it is said that hunger and poverty makes men industrious and laws make them good."⁶² Echoing Aristotle, Machiavelli argues that good institutions both foster and depend on good customs. A people that is completely corrupt cannot be improved by good laws, he writes, because "just as good customs require laws in order to be maintained, so laws require good customs in order to be observed."⁶³ Moreover, if the people become corrupt, changing the laws will not help, unless one also changes the institutions through which the laws are made. In republican Rome, for example, all citizens were entitled to seek key offices, which worked well as long as humility and fear of public disgrace dissuaded everyone except the most qualified from seeking office. But when people began to seek office on the basis of charm or power, rather than genuine ability, the institution of allowing anyone to seek office became harmful. Similarly, the Roman institution that allowed any citizen to propose a law, and to express an opinion on any proposed law, was good only as long as the people were good.⁶⁴

Machiavelli recognizes that institutional procedures, which are "slow to move," often fail when confronted with "extraordinary circumstances," such as war or rebellion.⁶⁵ But he argues for institutional means of addressing the limits of institutions. Because extraordinary means are sometimes necessary, they should be made lawful; otherwise, the people come to disrespect the law. Machiavelli thus defends the institution of "dictator" in republican Rome, because it provided a legal way to cope with extraordinary circumstances. Dictators should be appointed only for fixed periods, with their authority limited to the particular problem that necessitated their appointment. It is only extraordinary offices created through "private authority" and "extraordinary means" that harm republics, not those

created through “ordinary means” and “in accord with public laws.” If a republic has no such institution, “it must necessarily come to ruin by obeying its laws or break them in order to avoid its own ruin.” And “if one establishes the habit of breaking the laws for good reasons, later on, under the same pretext, one can break them for bad reasons.”⁶⁶

In addition to good institutions, Machiavelli argues, as well as both good fortune and inspiring leaders, a republic relies on its citizens taking an active role in politics.⁶⁷ In this respect, as McCormick has argued, Machiavelli again differs from most republican thinkers, both before his time and since.⁶⁸ Many models of republicanism—Sparta, Venice, Florence—were elective oligarchies, relegating the people to the selection of an elite who ruled with minimal public interference. This type of republicanism is a forerunner of liberal representative government, discussed in chapter 3, which is distinct from the communitarian version of republicanism popular among some democratic theorists today. The latter rests on the tradition of civic or classical republicanism, usually associated with Aristotle and Rousseau, in which virtuous participation in the collective enactment of one’s community is a key part of the good life. Machiavelli’s version of republicanism, which one might anachronistically call “democratic republicanism,” differs from both the elitism of the Venetian republic and the communitarianism of Aristotle and Rousseau. Popular participation, for Machiavelli, is not about pursuing the good life but about protecting oneself and one’s fellow citizens from domination. Doing so requires not merely civic virtue but institutions that facilitate public contestation of elite decisions.⁶⁹

In reply to those who equate the people with a mob—“either a humble slave or a cruel master”—Machiavelli argues that this description applies only to a people not governed by laws.⁷⁰ Moreover, in the absence of law, these attributes apply equally well to princes, “and most of all to princes, for each person who is not regulated by the laws will commit the very same errors as an uncontrolled crowd of people.” Both a prince and a people regulated by laws, in contrast, “neither rules arrogantly nor humbly obeys.” Laws are necessary for both princes and the people, “because a prince who is able to do what he wishes is mad, and a people that can do what it wishes is not wise.” Indeed, Machiavelli goes on to argue that, if both a people and a prince are constrained by laws, the people as a whole will actually be more competent than the average prince. If neither are constrained by laws, the people will make fewer and less serious errors. Moreover, when the people make mistakes, they learn from them,

but “nobody can speak to an evil prince, nor is there any other remedy for him than the sword.”⁷¹

It is also worth noting, given recent scholarship on public participation in technical controversies, that Machiavelli also repeatedly expresses confidence in ordinary citizens’ capacity for intelligent political judgment. When the people must judge between competing views in political debate, Machiavelli writes, “it is only on the rarest of occasions that it does not select the best opinion and that it is not capable of understanding the truth it hears.”⁷² Machiavelli also believes that the people are better at selecting magistrates than a prince, and he thinks that when distributing offices the people deceives itself less often than the nobles.⁷³ Machiavelli repeatedly praises the Roman tribunes, the representatives of the people, for their capacity to “cure the insolence of the nobles.”⁷⁴ He notes with approval that the tribunes mediated not only between the people and the elites, but also among the elites, who would otherwise have failed to resolve their disagreements and faithfully execute the law.⁷⁵

Machiavelli makes clear, however, that ordinary citizens are generally inclined to avoid becoming involved in politics. Unlike nobles, common citizens have little hope of usurping the liberty of others, so their main desire is simply “not to be dominated.”⁷⁶ Some commentators take such statements as evidence of skepticism toward popular competence and participation. They see in this feature of Machiavelli’s thought a precursor to liberal theories of representative government that rely on a passive citizenry.⁷⁷ But Machiavelli argues repeatedly that popular liberty can be realized only through institutions that facilitate vigorous political activity, especially when necessary to prevent domination.⁷⁸ When Roman citizens wanted new laws, Machiavelli notes with approval, they protested, “running wildly through the streets, closing the shops”; or they left the city entirely, or refused to register for military service, “so that to placate them it was necessary to give them some measure of satisfaction.”⁷⁹ Indeed, Machiavelli argues, “every city must possess its own methods for allowing the people to express their ambitions.”⁸⁰ Machiavelli thus praises the Roman institutions that facilitated popular resistance to noble ambitions. As McCormick has emphasized, Machiavelli is especially fond of the Roman procedures for popular indictment and trial of both magistrates and prominent private citizens suspected of wrongdoing. Such procedures offered a key means, in addition to elections, of holding elites publicly accountable. Furthermore, Machiavelli argues that in a republic “judges must be many in number,” and he contrasts Rome’s

large popular juries with Florence's small council of eight judges, arguing that the latter is more subject to manipulation and intimidation by elites.⁸¹ Machiavelli recognizes that large popular juries may be vulnerable to demagogues who exploit popular prejudices, but he thinks demagoguery can be hindered by requiring accusations of wrongdoing to be publicly voiced and defended. Similarly, Machiavelli praises the Roman plebs who demanded the establishment of tribunes to represent them, and then vigorously defended the tribunes when necessary.⁸² Political elites will always try to usurp the liberty of the people, but the threat can be mitigated through formal institutions that give the citizenry real power.

Despite his praise for popular political activism, Machiavelli also argues that in elections the people generally prefer a competent nobleman over one of their own.⁸³ In this respect, Machiavelli differs markedly from today's participatory democrats and communitarian republicans. Citing Cicero, Machiavelli notes that "the people, although ignorant, can grasp the truth, and they readily yield when they are told the truth by a trustworthy man."⁸⁴ As Alexander Hamilton argues in *The Federalist*, discussed in chapter 3, most people are more concerned with having their interests competently protected than with participating in politics. To the extent that the former requires the latter, Machiavelli insists on vigorous participation, but only to that extent. Of course, given the constant threat of domination by corrupt and incompetent governments (underestimated by Hamilton), not to mention the dangers posed by one's fellow citizens, the citizens in a Machiavellian republic cannot afford to ignore politics. In contrast to liberal theorists of representative government, Machiavelli believes the people's deference to competent leaders does not lessen their need to be involved in republican self-government. It just shifts the rationale for participation. In place of the collective self-expression and self-realization extolled by communitarian versions of republicanism, Machiavelli offers an ethic of instrumental, purposive, carefully targeted political engagement.

Conclusion

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, some of Machiavelli's interpreters think he offers the first modern science of politics, while others insist that his thought is distinctly nonscientific. The preceding discussion indicates revealing affinities between certain elements of Machiavelli's

thought and modern science, but they have little to do with standard notions of scientific method. Rather, these affinities appear in an epistemology that generates instrumental power through a rhetoric of social distance. Expert authority, for Machiavelli, rests on first creating a rhetorical gap between expert knowledge and social convention, such that the expert acquires unmediated access to how things really are beneath the conventions. The expert then humbly offers “a little book” that promises to help its reader reach back across the gap and act powerfully within the world of convention.

Machiavelli combines this rhetoric of expertise with a profound awareness of the practical limits of expertise and the institutional requirements for its successful use. Because the world is permeated by contingencies, and every action has unpredictable outcomes, expert knowledge should not be mechanically applied to novel circumstances. Expertise is best used as one resource among many for creative thought and action. And expert advice must be structured to serve the needs of the state, not merely those of either political elites or experts themselves.

More generally, Machiavelli suggests that lay citizens can rely on experts, politicians, and other elites only to the extent that they continually subject them to critical scrutiny. Such scrutiny cannot be carried out from the living room couch. It requires institutions that facilitate popular mobilization, education, and an ethos of public engagement. As McCormick writes, “Machiavelli suggests that a direct manifestation of the people within government, alongside a representation of them, is necessary to carry out successfully an appropriate patrolling of elites.”⁸⁵ This direct manifestation of the people takes different forms: it ranges from structured deliberative assemblies, like the plebian council, to popular movements and “running wildly through the streets.” As I attempt to show throughout this book, neither experts nor politicians can represent their constituents without active involvement by those they represent, and such involvement requires different kinds of institutional mediation.