Selections from Discourses on Livy, by Niccolò Machiavelli

Book I, Discourse 3. What kind of events gave rise in Rome to the creation of tribunes of the plebs, whereby that republic was made more perfect

All writers on politics have pointed out, and throughout history there are plenty of examples which indicate, that in constituting the legislating for a commonwealth it must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers. That evil dispositions often do not show themselves for a time is due to a hidden cause which those fail to perceive who have had no experience of the opposite; but in time—which is said to be the father of all truth—it reveals itself.

After the expulsion of the Tarquins there appeared to be in Rome the utmost harmony between the plebs and the senate. The nobles seemed to have set aside their pride, to have become imbued with the same spirit as the populace, and to be bearable by all, even by the meanest. In this neither their deception nor the cause of it was apparent so long as the Tarquins lived; for the nobility were afraid of them and feared that, if they treated the plebs badly, it would not be friendly towards them, but would make common cause with the Tarquins, so they treated the plebs with consideration. But, no sooner were the Tarquins dead and the fears of the nobility removed, that they began to vomit forth against the plebs the poison hid in their hearts and to oppress them in every way they could.

This bears out what has been said above, namely, that men never do good unless necessity drives them to it; but when they are too free to choose and can do just as they please, confusion and disorder become everywhere rampant. Hence it is said that hunger and poverty make men industrious, and that laws make them good. There is no need of legislation so long as things work well without it, but, when such good customs break down, legislation forthwith becomes necessary.

Book I, Discourse 6 Whether in Rome such a form of government could have been set up as would have removed the hostility between the populace and the Senate

Should then, anyone be about to set up a republic, he should first inquire whether it is to expand, as Rome did, both in dominion and power, or is it to be confined to narrow limits. In the first case it is essential to constitute it as Rome was constituted and to expect commotions and disputes of all kinds which must be dealt with as best they can, because without a large population, and this well armed, such a republic will never be able to grow, or hold its own should it grow.

…[Therefore,] to set up a republic which is to last a long time, the way to set about it is to constitute it as Sparta and Venice were constituted; to place it in a strong position and so to fortify it that no one will dream of taking it by a sudden assault…For war is made on a commonwealth for two reasons: (i) to subjugate it, and (ii) for fear of being subjugated by it…

[Lastly,] necessity will lead you to do many things which reason does not recommend…it will then come about that idleness will either render it effeminate or give rise to factions; and these two things, either in connection or separately, will bring about its downfall.
Book I, Discourse 10 An Indictment of Tyranny

If the history of these emperors be pondered well, it should serve as a striking lesson to any prince, and should teach him to distinguish between the ways of renown and of infamy, the ways of security and fear. For of the twenty-six emperors from Caesar to Maximinus, sixteen were assassinated and only ten died a natural death. And, if some of those who were killed were good men, as Galba and Pertinax were, their death was due to corruption which their predecessors had introduced among the troops. While, if among those who died ordinary deaths, there was a wicked man, like Severus, it must be put down to his great good luck and to his ‘virtue,’ two things of which few men enjoy both. It will be seen, too from a perusal of their history on what principle a good kingdom should rest; for all the emperors who acquired imperial power by inheritance were bad men, with the exception of Titus; those who acquired it through adoption, were all good, like the five counting from Nerva to Marcus; and when it fell to their heirs a period of decadence again ensued…

Let a prince put before himself the period from Nerva to Marcus, and let him compare it with the preceding period and with that which came after, and then let him decide in which he would rather have been born, and during which he would have chosen to be emperor. What he will find when good princes were ruling, is a prince securely reigning among subjects no less secure, a world replete with peace and justice. He will see the senate’s authority respected, the magistrates honoured, rich citizens enjoying their wealth, nobility and virtue held in the highest esteem, and everything working smoothly and going well. He will notice, on the other hand, the absence of any rancour, any licentiousness, corruption, or ambition, and that in this golden age everyone is free to hold and to defend his own opinion. He will behold, in short, the world triumphant, its prince glorious and respected by all, the people fond of him and secure under his rule.

If he then looks attentively at the times of the other emperors, he will find them distraught with wars, torn by seditious, brutal alike in peace and in war, princes frequently killed by assassins, civil wars and foreign wars constantly occurring. Italy in travail and ever a prey to fresh misfortunes, its cities demolished and pillaged. He will see Rome burnt, its Capitol demolished by its own citizens, ancient temples lying desolate, religious rites grown corrupt, adultery rampant throughout the city. He will find the sea covered with exiles and the rocks stained with blood. In Rome he will see countless atrocities perpetrated; rank, riches, the honours men have won, and above all, virtue, looked upon as a capital crime. He will find calumniators rewarded, servants suborned to turn against their masters, freed men to turn against their patrons, and those who lack enemies attacked by their friends. He will thus happily learn how much Rome, Italy, and the world owed to Caesar.

Book I, Discourse 45 The Infliction of Injuries

For I do not think a worse example can be set in a republic than to make a law and not to observe it; and when it is not observed by the man who made it, so much the worse.

Book II, Discourse 2 Methods of Expansion

…Our religion [Christianity] has glorified humble and contemplative men, rather than men of action. It has assigned as man’s highest good humility, abnegation, and contempt for
mundane things, whereas the other [ancient] religion identified it with magnanimity, bodily
strength, and everything else that conduces to make men very bold. And, if our religion demands
that in you there be strength, what it asks for is strength to suffer rather than strength to do bold
things.

This pattern of life, therefore, appears to have made the world weak, and to have handed
it over as a prey to the wicked, who run it successfully and securely since they are well aware
that the generality of men, with paradise for their goal, consider how best to bear, rather than
how best to avenge, their injuries.

Book III, Discourse 6 On Conspiracies

Injuries may affect either a man’s property, his life, or his honour. The threat of
bloodshed is more dangerous than is the shedding of blood. To threaten to shed blood is, in fact,
extremely dangerous: whereas to shed it is attended with no danger at all, for a dead man cannot
contemplate vengeance, and those that remain alive usually leave you to do the contemplating.
But a man who has been threatened and sees that he must of necessity either do something or be
for it, has been turned into a real menace for the prince, as we shall cite cases presently to show.

Prescinding from the case in which action is imposed by necessity, injuries affecting a
man’s property or honour are the two things which give men greater offence than anything else,
and against them the prince should be on his guard, for he can never so despoil anyone but that
there will remain to him a knife with which to wreak vengeance. Nor can he deprive a man of
his honour to such an extent that his mind will cease to be set on vengeance. And of the honours
of which men may be deprived, that which imports most is a woman’s honour, and, after that,
contempt for a man’s person. It was this that caused Pausanias to take up arms against Philip of
Macedon; and this that has caused many others to take up arms against many other princes. In
our day, Lucio Belanti would not have been moved to conspire against Pandalfo, the tyrant of
Siena, if he had not given him his daughter to wife and then taken her away again, as we shall
relate in due course. The chief cause which led the Pazzi to conspire against the Medici was the
inheritance of Giovanni Bonromei of which they had been deprived by the Medici’s orders.

Another cause, and this a very powerful one, that makes men conspire against a prince, is
the desire to liberate their fatherland of which a prince has seized possession. It was this that
cause Brutus and Cassius to turn against Caesar…

Book III, Discourse 16 Genuine virtue counts in difficult times, but, when things are going
good, it is rather to those whose popularity is due to wealth or parentage that men look

It always has been, and always will be, the lot of great and outstanding men to be passed
over by a republic in times of peace, for the reputation acquired by their virtue arouses envy, and
in peaceful times there are plenty of citizens who seek not merely to become their equals but
even their superiors. On this point there is a good passage by Thucydides, the Greek historian,
who shows how, when the Athenians had got the upper hand in the Peloponnesian War, and had
curbed the pride of the Spartans and brought the rest of Greece into subjection, their reputation
was almost so great they planned to occupy Sicily. When the invasion was under discussion in
Athens, Alcibiades and some other citizens urged that it should be undertaken, since they were
men who cared little for the public good, but were looking to the honours they would gain,
should they command the expedition as they proposed to do. But Nicias, whose reputation stood higher than anyone else’s, dissuaded Athens from the course; and, in addressing the people, the chief reason he gave to show that he was in good faith was that, in advising against the war, he was advising them to do what could not be in his own interests…

We see, therefore, in this incident, a disorder to which republics are liable, namely that of showing but little esteem in time of peace for men of worth. This arouses their indignation on two accounts. First, they are themselves deprived of their position. Secondly, they find unworthy men who lack their competence, being made their associates and superiors. This disorder has brought about the ruin of many republics, for citizens who see that their merits are not appreciated and that this is because the times are untroubled and without danger, set about causing trouble and stirring up wars, prejudicial to the republic.

If one inquires what remedies may be applied, two suggest themselves. First, to keep the citizens poor, so that by wealth without worth they may be able to corrupt neither themselves nor other people. Secondly, to be so prepared that it may be possible at any time to go to war, in which case there will always be a demand for citizens of repute, as there was in Rome in its early days. For, since Rome always had armies in the field, there was always room for men of virtue.

**Selections from *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli**

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Continuing now with our list of qualities, let me say that every prince should prefer to be considered merciful rather than cruel, yet he should be careful not to mismanage this clemency of his. People thought Cesare Borgia was cruel, but that cruelty of his reorganized the Romagna, united it, and established it in peace and loyalty. Anyone who views the matter realistically will see that this prince was much more merciful than the people of Florence who, to avoid the reputation of cruelty, allowed Pistoia to be destroyed. Thus, no prince should mind being called cruel for what he does to keep his subjects united and loyal; he may make examples of a very few, but he will be more merciful in reality than those who, in their tenderheartedness, allow disorders to occur, with their attendant murders and lootings. Such turbulence brings harm to an entire community, while the executions ordered by a prince affect only one individual at a time. A new prince, above all others, cannot possibly avoid a name for cruelty, since new states are always in danger. And Virgil, speaking through the mouth of Dido says:

My cruel fate

And doubts attending an unsettled state

Force me to guard my coast from foreign foes.
Yet a prince should be slow to believe rumors and to commit himself to action on the basis of them. He should not be afraid of his own thoughts; he ought to proceed cautiously, moderating his conduct with prudence and humanity, allowing neither overconfidence to make him careless, nor overtimidity to make him intolerable.

Here the question arises: is it better to be loved than feared, or vice versa? I don’t doubt that every prince would like to be both; but since it is hard to accommodate these qualities, if you have to make a choice, to be feared is much safer than to be loved. For it is a good general rule about men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain. While you serve their welfare, they are all yours, offering their blood, their belongings, their lives, and their children's lives, as we noted above—so long as the danger is remote. But when the danger is close at hand, they turn against you. Then, any prince who has relied on their words and has made no other preparations will come to grief; because friendships that are bought at a price, and not with greatness and nobility of soul, may be paid for but they are not acquired, and they cannot be used in time of need. People are less concerned with offending a man who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared: the reason is that love is a link of obligation which men, because they are rotten, will break any time they think doing so serves their advantage; but fear involves dread of punishment, from which they can never escape.

Still, a prince should make himself feared in such a way that, even if he gets no love, he gets no hate either; because it is perfectly possible to be feared and not hated, and this will be the result if only the prince will keep his hands off the property of his subjects or citizens, and off their women. When he does have to shed blood, he should be sure to have a strong justification and manifest cause; but above all, he should not confiscate people's property, because men are quicker to forget the death of a father than the loss of a patrimony. Besides, pretexts for confiscation are always plentiful, it never fails that a prince who starts living by plunder can find reasons to rob someone else. Excuses for proceeding against someone’s life are much rarer and more quickly exhausted.