Machiavelli and the Contestable Surface: Zuckert and Strauss

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Abstract: Both Zuckert and Strauss take the “surface” of Machiavelli’s work as the necessary starting point for their interpretations. Zuckert differs from Strauss, however, with respect to what she takes the surface to be. She focuses more attentively on the literary character of the work, as written or literary, and so is led to a different series of observations and emphases in her interpretation of Machiavelli. I propose to draw out a comparison between Catherine Zuckert’s interpretation of Machiavelli and that of Leo Strauss. This is useful, to be sure, inasmuch as it might contribute to an understanding of the other discussions of Zuckert’s Machiavelli in this issue. But the most serious reason for briefly elaborating this topic in Zuckert’s learned and sweeping book is that it opens up an extremely rich vein—I am tempted to call it a seam of gold—running through the book as a whole. By following it out a little bit, we can appreciate something unique and genuinely beautiful about her study.

The terms of the comparison may be stated very simply at the outset: both Strauss and Zuckert take the “surface” of Machiavelli very seriously, but they disagree about what the surface is and this results in some strikingly different emphases and interpretations of the substance of Machiavelli’s thought. Zuckert no less than Strauss gives full expression to this thought: “the surface of a book as intended by its author, belongs as much to the book as does its substance” (TM 24).

In the introduction to Thoughts on Machiavelli Strauss expresses a thought that has been called the “golden sentence”: “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.” Strauss’s point, here, is that it is necessary to appreciate the “simple...
opinion” that Machiavelli is a “teacher of evil” in order truly to appreciate the “intrepidity of his thought, the grandeur of his vision, and the graceful subtlety of his speech” (TM 13). As he says, “There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface. The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things” (TM 13).

What does Strauss mean by the “surface” when it comes to Machiavelli? As we have seen, he introduces the subject by referencing the “simple,” not to say “old-fashioned,” opinion that Machiavelli is a teacher of evil. He develops the idea, though, not by referring to this opinion in any obvious way, but by drawing out what may be implied by the fact of Machiavelli’s contending that in each of his two main works, the Prince and the Discourses, he communicates everything that he knows. Strauss develops the differences—it is tempting to say “superficial” differences—between these two works by teasing out an interpretation of the one as traditional and the other as more evidently “revolutionary.”

What Strauss then takes as the surface of Machiavelli’s works, if it is permissible to exaggerate slightly, is a series of textual oddities that communicate a tension between tradition and revolution. For example: the Prince is a very traditional-seeming book. Why? (1) It has the “form” of a mirror of princes, a well-established genre. (2) Its chapter titles are in Latin, not Italian. (3) It is addressed to an actual, legitimate (more or less) monarch, Lorenzo de Medici (4) Its first words are “It is customary,” soligno. All of this gives it a traditional veneer. In contrast, the other book in which Machiavelli professes to communicate all that he knows, the Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy, seems more suspiciously “revolutionary.” (1) It does not have a traditional “form,” like a mirror of princes (it is, though, a commentary of sorts—Strauss compares it to sermons—on an old book, Livy’s history of Rome). (2) Its chapter titles are in Italian, not Latin, and (3) they are more disputatious about accepted opinion. (4) It is addressed to two, not just one, potential princes—that is, to those numerous potential princes whose talents and abilities are not accommodated by conventional arrangements as they currently

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3As Strauss states at numerous points, then, throughout this study of Machiavelli: “Let us return once more to the beginning” (TM 54). Or “To gain some clarity, let us return once more to the surface, to the beginning of the beginning” (TM 17). “But let us return once more to the surface” (TM 27). See TM 24. The surface relates to reverence or “more than ordinary care”: “He certainly expects his reader to read Livy with more than ordinary care or, to return to the surface, with profound reverence” (TM 122).

exist. (5) Its first word is Io, “I.” Mr. Machiavelli points, or half-points, to himself.

In his interpretations of Machiavelli, perhaps the most famous of the textual oddities Strauss concentrates on are the appearances of numerical regularities and patterns. The *Discourses on Livy*, he notes, has the same number of chapters as Livy’s history of Rome was said to have books. Strauss then asks, does the number of chapters in the *Prince* seem to mean anything (HPP 311)? Let us recall how Strauss arrives at this position. The *Prince* has twenty-six chapters; this is twice thirteen, thirteen being the number that stands for chance or *fortuna* (obviously an important theme in Machiavelli). Chapters, therefore, which are a multiple of twenty-six or thirteen in his works deserve scrutiny; the first of these to attract attention is chapter 26 of the *Discourses*, entitled, “A new prince, in a city or country taken by him, must make everything new.” The work of the new prince—virtually equivalent to an absolute tyrant, who makes everything new, like David, like Christ, we are led to think—is at the heart of Machiavelli’s aspiration for the reform of political life. Indeed, Strauss says the theme of the “new prince” is the highest in the *Prince*.

Strauss’s attention to what then might be called Machiavelli’s millenarianism, the world-changing work of the “new prince,” informs the most distinctive elements of his interpretation, and, one could say, those of many of his best-known students and epigones. For example: The *Prince* concludes, in chapter 26, with a summons to the reader to unite the disparate polities of Italy and liberate her from the barbarians, the implication being that to do so would be to imitate the work of Cyrus, Moses, and Theseus—the exemplary new princes, founders, first encountered in chapter 6. But Moses comes in also for more special treatment: the list of miraculous events mentioned by Machiavelli seems to refer to the bringing of a new code or “modes and orders.” Strauss argues that Machiavelli’s allusion to the bringing of the new code of laws by Moses makes the reader think that not Lorenzo but Machiavelli himself is like Moses, the true bringer of “new modes and orders,” so to speak. The founder prince summoned at the end of the *Prince* is not Lorenzo, but Machiavelli himself, the founder of modernity.

For Strauss, the surface exhibited in, variously, chapter titles, number of chapters, and so on leads to reading the “new prince” as referring to Machiavelli himself, and to read Machiavelli as deliberately instaurating a new epoch in human history, what Strauss refers to as “modernity”: the millenarian Machiavelli, founder-prince of modernity.

What does Zuckert treat as the surface of Machiavelli’s work? She gives greater priority to two superficial facts than Strauss does: first, the explicit direction of books toward their “purported”—a word that occurs numerous times in Zuckert’s interpretation (MP 53, 99, 110)—addressee or audience, as indicated in the epistle dedicatory of the works in question. Zuckert attends assiduously to Machiavelli’s statement of who the imagined reader is. Second, she stresses the fact of Machiavelli’s having written several works beyond simply the two in which he claims to express “all that he knows.”
Now, to be sure, the spirit of such attention is not alien to Strauss. But the attentiveness of Zuckert’s literary reading makes Machiavelli’s historical situation emerge as more important for understanding him than Strauss allowed.

Zuckert sketches her differences with Strauss in her discussion of the Discourses. In what follows, let us unroll the implications of her understanding of the surface in her interpretation of the Prince.

In contrast to Strauss’s attention to the millenarian, not to say quasi-divine character of Machiavelli’s aspirations or hopes for the “new prince” who will make all things new, Zuckert draws out a remarkably sober and frequently restrained account from Machiavelli. The dedication is central to her reading: “whether Machiavelli actually presented his little book to the prince or not, he apparently wanted it to be read as if he were giving it to a Medici prince for the purpose of employment” (MP 41–42). As Machiavelli indicates in the dedication, the book aims to correct the principal error made by princes—namely, their failure to understand princes, that is, themselves and their rivals. He therefore provides an education in how they can win power and, even more, especially emphasized in Zuckert’s interpretation, maintain their standing by ultimately outdoing one another in serving the people. As Strauss and others have also noted, the presentation is much constrained by the rhetorical needs of speaking to a hard-boiled, mainly self-interested prince. But this advice qua advice has an order and structure that Zuckert uncovers. She is rigorously attentive to the argument of Machiavelli’s presentation: why does this follow that? Why does one subject come after the treatment of another? These are treated not as literary devices or oddities, but as steps of an argument. The key to such interpretation is to read Machiavelli’s text as though it were being addressed to a reader in the position of Lorenzo de Medici.

Thus, by means of her rigorous attention to the literary pretense of the book—namely, that it is addressed to an only semicapable Medici prince—Zuckert reinforces the “political” horizon of the Prince. By “political horizon” I mean the almost prosaic attention to the perspective of the citizen and, especially, statesman or prince to whom the book addresses itself. There is less about world-historical, epochal founding, of contesting thousand-year reigns of this sect or that, and more about how to organize a citizenry to be an army to fight the church, take over Italy, and maintain such a position. Thus the exemplary founders of Prince chapter 6, who formed peoples out

5Thus, “In The Prince Machiavelli announces the change he is advocating in the moral standards used to evaluate leaders and their governments more clearly than the basis of those opinions in popular opinion and sentiments” (MP 107).

6Once again, this procedure is not strictly speaking absent from Strauss’s interpretation: “At any rate, in studying the general teaching of the Prince we must never lose sight of the particular situation in which Lorenzo finds himself. We must understand the general in light of the particular” (TM 62–63).
of bare matter thousands of years in the past, recede into the background of Zuckert’s interpretation. Much more prominent are the princes and peoples of contemporary Italy. As she states, “[Machiavelli] does not expect Lorenzo or any other reader in a civilized time and place literally to reenact such a founding” (MP 57, emphasis added). To repeat and clarify, then: Zuckert is not saying that Machiavelli actually thinks that Lorenzo will follow his instructions. Instead, Machiavelli is providing instructions as though to a figure like Lorenzo, and this advice may still—as instructions for uniting Italy—be quite germane.

Of a piece with this attention to the political horizon is the following observation: as politics steps forward—the almost quotidian politics of faction and strife, not the world-historical politics of birthing modernity—the uniquely strong emphasis Strauss places on defeating or refuting Christianity recedes. Religion is present, of course, but is treated squarely within the utilitarian framework of the predicaments of ruling. Strauss’s emphasis, for example, on seeing Machiavelli’s confrontation with Livy in the *Discourses* as a proxy for disputing the authority of the Bible, Zuckert replaces with attention to the plainly political meaning of establishing a republic that harnesses the class quarrels and tumults that emerge between the great and the people—in the case of Rome, the senate and the plebs—to an energetic, popular republicanism.

Perhaps it would be fitting to conclude with a word about the surface of Zuckert’s book. We begin, naturally enough, with the title: *Machiavelli’s Politics*. If contrasted with the title of her largest work, *Plato’s Philosophers*, some of its most important features may emerge. The title of *Plato’s Philosophers* signifies, at the risk of belaboring the obvious, the centrality of philosophy, the life in pursuit of wisdom, to which Plato directs us. More precisely, it refers to the conjoined presentation and concealment of Plato’s understanding of the worth of Socratic philosophy as a way of life behind a series of philosophic spokesmen, namely, the Eleatic Stranger, the Athenian Stranger, Timaeus, Parmenides, and a certain Socrates. Zuckert is not blind: she knows that of these, Socrates is the hero, the preeminent one; what she does, though, is begin from the evident, literary fact of several and various philosophic spokesmen and asks, What do we learn about Plato Absconditus by the fact of his making Socrates first among equals with these other philosophers? She begins from what I would call the literary surface to pursue this question to the depths and back.

How does the title of Zuckert’s latest opus, *Machiavelli’s Politics*, compare? The possessor is obviously different: Machiavelli vs. Plato. In place of *philosophers* in the plural we have politics, a *plurale tantum*. Whereas Plato foregrounds philosophy as the distinctive and most fulfilling human activity, Machiavelli does the same for politics. But this is not quite it: whereas Plato presents particular philosophers, the human beings who practice philosophy, Machiavelli presents politics as, again, the *plurale tantum*. It only ever takes place in the plural. Plato is concealed by the presence of his characters,
characters exclusively in dialogues. Machiavelli, is he concealed? If so, by what? Perhaps he is concealed by the activity he celebrates and acknowledges; his work of thought is concealed by the activity he commands his readers to attend to. Yet the work behind the concealment is a work of thought, evident through the intelligence informing the literary devices and inventions conceived by the author. It is one thing to be a “philosopher” when you present philosophy as the highest form of human life; it is another thing to be a “philosopher” when you go out of your way, as Machiavelli does, to deny that this is the highest form of human life, or to show that this form of human eros goes inherently unfulfilled, making it better, then, to dedicate oneself to the admittedly ephemeral satisfactions of politics.

For Zuckert the surface is the literary surface, where the poetic or artistic—that is, the literary—work of the author exhibits itself as a work of thought and invites the reader to join in the activity of thinking, not to say philosophizing. This is what we learn from Zuckert: in order properly to approach the thought of Machiavelli, it is necessary to see that by his literary artistry, as it governs his written works, he directs our attention to the “actions of great men,” or would-be great men, the ones he is advising in politics, that is, his audience of historical actors. Thus, to appreciate the liberation of Machiavelli’s mind from his context, it is necessary to study assiduously his directing us, in a way, to that context.