

*The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*  
Vol. II, Issue 2/2018  
© The Authors 2018  
Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu/>



## BOOK REVIEW:

Celenza, Christopher S. *Machiavelli, A Portrait*.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 256 pp.

By Edmund O'Toole, PhD  
NUI Galway  
Ireland



The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing.

*This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, which permits others to copy or share the article, provided original work is properly cited and that this is not done for commercial purposes. Users may not remix, transform, or build upon the material and may not distribute the modified material (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)*

Celenza, Christopher S. *Machiavelli, A Portrait*.  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. 256 pp.

Machiavelli continues to fascinate and intrigue. Much has been written about the man and his works. Unfortunately, Celenza's book does not add in any insightful way to the literature on Machiavelli. This book is not so much a portrait of Machiavelli but more that of a sketch. It is not a deeply academic or intimate book, notes and bibliography are modest. It is aimed at a popular or general audience as an introduction to Machiavelli and his work, as the acknowledgement at the end of the book attests. With this in mind I thought the book might have worked better with another publisher with editorial understanding and concerns suitable for such an audience. As it is, it suffers from structural problems, some errors and a limited socio-philosophical perspective even for the general reader.

It begins with a brief account of important aspects of the Italian and Florentine Renaissance, with a survey of linguistic developments in Italy and the socio-historical conditions in which Machiavelli would have developed his thought. At the end of the first chapter, after recounting important events, such as the rise and fall from power of the Dominican friar Savonarola in Florence, the author asks what Machiavelli would have thought of such events and adds that Machiavelli tells us in his later works, which will be dealt with in later chapters. Yet Machiavelli is hardly present in this chapter. He only really enters into the story in the next chapter when he is already a man in his thirties and participating in the political life as Florentine secretary.

But there are some errors, mainly in respect to the motivation and organization concerning Florentine politics and governance. Contrary to what Celenza suggests, Piero Soderini, who became Gonfaloniere or standard-bearer for life in Florence in 1502, did not seek a narrow governance by aristocracy, or, as he claims, was feared that he wanted to become a prince himself, and he encouraged a greater popular involvement, it was because of this that he lost the support of the aristocracy. As such, it was the Medici who returned to power after 1512 and Soderini was forced into exile. Although, to be fair, Celenza does recognize that Soderini did make concessions to the people but these were more than just gestures. As well, there are other minor inaccuracies.

The middle chapters onwards deal with Machiavelli's work, with *The Prince* given the longest treatment in chapter 4. Celenza opens his chapter on *The Prince* by talking about the influence and fascination for the work by the 16<sup>th</sup> century and points to Francis Bacon as admiring Machiavelli as a predecessor. In dealing with Bacon, Celenza does not articulate the lessons that Bacon had learned from Machiavelli, and this contributes to other flaws, namely an understanding of some of the socio-philosophical elements of Machiavelli's thought.

Bacon saw Machiavelli's empiricism and reduction to principle as important lessons, lessons which informed his own scientific method. He also credited Machiavelli as the first philosopher who distinguishes between the "ought" and the "is". This a significant philosophical issue since it not only relates to a distinction of the ideal and the real but as a central concern in dealing with any conceptualization of normativity. Celenza does emphasize these distinctions throughout but claims Machiavelli was unconcerned with the "ought". However, this underplays the Machiavelli he describes as having knowledge of some philosophical works, along with the work of historians. Machiavelli understood well the rhetorical value of "ought", as much as Celenza credits him with the understanding of

the rhetorical value of history. This is evident in the virtues Machiavelli extolls the prince to appear to have, including religiosity.

Celenza returns to the discussing linguistics in chapter 4, a discussion which could have been kept in its first appearance at the beginning of the book. Granted that Celenza may have been trying to establish the tone of *The Prince* but it takes from the content of the book in this chapter, which only enters into the discussion after a third of the chapter.

In dealing with the religious and theological aspects of Machiavelli, Celenza does engage in the controversial implications of Christianity as a faith which makes people weak, and one not often adhered to by the authority of the Church. But he does not expose the theological appeal of paganism over Christianity, which was not just based on instrumental, ritual or "martial fashion" but as a religion which had a more authentic correspondence with human nature and the relation of the human with nature, I would argue that this was the intrinsic appeal of paganism.

But then Celenza also claims that Machiavelli does not have a "philosophy of human nature" and this is quite a statement since there is no attempt to justify this position and substantial evidence against. For Machiavelli, man lives in a condition of nature as war, it was necessary not only to imitate great men when appropriate but also animals, and those with the qualities of ferocity and cunning, the lion and the fox. But Celeneza does not engage with this consideration which had been an important point of commentary for other biographers. These are conceits which I think should be made known to the general reader.

There are the other significant aspects of Machiavelli's thought, details glossed over or completely absent. The effect of these omissions and other problems are cumulative in undermining the books philosophical and sociological understanding. Another example is Celenza's emphasises the premodern, and the book is often at its best when he is doing so, but there is no substantive or balanced account of the prefiguring of modernity by Machiavelli. The modern elements of individualism and instrumentalism in ethics are given scant regard but should be considered important, even for the general reader.

In emphasizing the premodern, the author continually enjoins the reader to remember that the contemporary world and the premodern as fundamentally different. This can be annoying, with commentary lines such as "Things were different in Machiavelli's time." (34) and later on the same page "The world was fundamentally different then, and Machiavelli's gift was his ability to see that world as it was." (34) There are many more pieces of similar commentary throughout the book that come across as overbearing.

But, though there is lack of any clear insight beyond the premodern, the emphasis can become a bit excessive, it is the strongest aspect of the book and works well with some chapters. Chapter 5 "Conversing with the Ancients" covers Machiavelli's work *Discourses On Livy* but also addresses themes such the appeal of ancient religion. Celeneza also gives a commentary on premodern representations of the masculine and feminine which has thoughtful resonance. The framing of his discussions on the *Discourses* with the life of Machiavelli is well balanced.

The penultimate chapter deals with Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* which were written at a time which seemed to mark a return to public life for Machiavelli, only for fortune to turn again, and as before to be out of favour. This is a good chapter in so far as Machiavelli's return and demise is mirrored in the account of the histories and the reinforcement of lessons works very well here.

But the reinforcement of lessons with experiences doesn't work well in other chapters in the book. Some events were mentioned briefly in early parts of the book then given greater discussion when the relevant lessons were discussed in respect to the work. This had the effect of giving some repetition but also reduced the space and effect of analysis. Celenza does explore themes and attempts to lay out lessons but important considerations go unmentioned.

Granted, as the author later points out, via Isaiah Berlin, interpretation is such a significant aspect of Machiavelli's work that even multiple oppositions exist. Nevertheless, in order to arrive at an understanding of Machiavelli certain concepts should be clearly expressed. For example, conflict and factionalism are dealt with reasonably well by Celenza throughout the book, with the main focus on class, competition and glory, but he does not relate a significant contribution to conflict which Machiavelli had explicitly recognized, namely envy. Machiavelli gave envy as leading to conflict and competition, and, importantly, he gives envy as one of the reasons for Savonarola's and Soderini's fall from power. Power can be maintained by destroying those who are envious.

Celenza often viewed Machiavelli as being tactless or going too far in sharing his options and advice. But this could be seen as an essential quality of Machiavelli, in that he is bold in expression. His philosophy is for men of action and not for men of contemplation.

Edmund O'Toole, PhD  
NUI Galway  
Ireland