Note

MACHIAVELLI, ARISTOTLE AND POCOCK — A QUESTION OF EVIDENCE*

J.G.A. POCOCK's mammoth work, *The Machiavellian Moment* (1973), promises to become a classic. Though its size and opacity of style[1] may deter all readers but the most diligent and devoted, its indirect influence, through reviews, references and hearsay among historians, is already considerable. The book covers a great deal of ground, dealing with many large themes over a great sweep of Western history. This note is concerned with one aspect of the account of Machiavelli, principally Pocock's view of the relation between Machiavelli's political theory and the political thought of the Greeks. This is an important part of Pocock's argument because on it turns the question of the extent of Machiavelli's originality as a political theorist. Is the Machiavellian moment as described by Pocock truly Machiavelli's own moment? It also raises, as we shall see, serious questions about Pocock's method and the relevance of evidence in the history of ideas.

To establish context, we need to begin with a brief summary of Pocock's argument in the first two parts of *The Machiavellian Moment,* the parts which deal with Machiavelli and his predecessors. The main focus is what he calls 'the Machiavellian moment', that is the point in history of political and historical thought when men first confronted the problem of understanding and controlling the apparently chaotic and unpredictable events of secular time. The political theorists of the Florentine renaissance inherited a set of intellectual modes or paradigms which made such understanding and controlling difficult. The medieval mind had associated truth, order and predictability pre-eminently with the heavenly realm, the realm occupied by God and timeless universals. This

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1 The question of Pocock's style is crucial to a full assessment of his work. Though the outlines of the argument are clearly expressed at the beginnings of sections, chapters, sometimes even paragraphs, much of the detailed exposition is convoluted, allusive and difficult, if not impossible, to penetrate. Opinions differ about whether this difficulty of expression is justified by the enterprise of breaking new historical and philosophical ground or whether it serves merely to mystify and unnecessarily inflate arguments which might otherwise appear jejune. Final judgement would need to depend on a detailed exegesis of passages, which is beyond the scope of this note. For a full discussion of the difficulties of Pocock's style, see the review article by J. H. Hexter, *History and Theory,* XVI (1977), 306-18.

world-view devalued the secular world of sense perception and human experience, a world characterized by unreliability and contingency, the realm of chance and fortune. In so far as there was any regularity in human affairs, it was to be found in unchanging, immemorial law and custom which had its origin in the distant past. Unusual, unpredictable events, not covered by custom, were random and irrational, incapable of being understood or explained, at least by man—they might be part of a rational plan from the point of view of God or Providence, but such rationality was inscrutable to man.

Renaissance political writers managed to break down this ahistorical world-view and paved the way for the modern assumption of ordered, historical development. Their immediate political concerns were the stability of small republics and the extent to which the citizen participation in the political constitution of these republics was necessary for this stability. In grappling with these problems, they made creative use of a number of intellectual discoveries derived from the revival of classical learning. One such discovery was that classical antiquity was a separate and distinct era, separated from the contemporary world by a period of political regression: political history was therefore divided into different epochs in which republics had greater or less chance of survival. Another was the political theory of Aristotle, which offered a view of man as a political animal, a being whose full potential could be developed only in the context of political participation in a republican form of government. Like Polybius, the Greek historian of republican Rome, Aristotle advocated a mixed or balanced constitution as the type of government most likely to guarantee political stability. A contemporary example of such a mixed and stable constitution was provided by the city of Venice, the most stable (*serenissima*) of the Italian republics. Using these ideas, Machiavelli, in particular, was able to establish that the secular world was not uniformly chaotic, that an able and skilful legislator could impose form and order on the realm of contingency or *fortuna* without the support of divine or timeless agencies, that a virtuous and stable republic could be established relying on the military virtue of its citizens. The basis of modern republicanism was laid.

The argument is bold and challenging and opens up a number of interesting questions and fruitful areas of research. But it is also open to objection. Pocock argues in terms of 'models', 'modes of thought', or 'paradigms' (the terms appear to be used interchangeably) which are self-confessed abstractions, exhibiting greater clarity and coherence than the actual ideas held by the different members of a particular society in a particular period. We must grant that in a subject of great complexity, such as the history of ideas, this is a not inappropriate method. The historian of ideas is not expected to follow all the ins and outs of the actual thoughts of actual men in actual historical situations. We will allow him to use models to reject peripheral notions or trivial counter-examples in order to simplify trends and concentrate on what he sees as the essential, central thread of development. But granting the right of selection does not absolve the historian from the duty to base his argument on sound historical evidence. The history of ideas, however selective and paradigmatic, is, after all, still history and must claim to describe and illuminate what was actually thought. The intellectual historian does not have a licence to peddle fiction, as Pocock himself recognizes. 'The test of this [selective] method is its ability to narrate a process actually taking place in the history of ideas' (p.183). To meet this test, Pocock's argument must be measured against the evidence. When his treatment of Aristotle—the only classical political theorist apart from Polybius to figure at all prominently in his

account of the background of Florentine political thought—is so measured, it is found seriously deficient. (The concentration on Greek rather than Roman thought is itself highly questionable, considering the Italian renaissance interest in the Roman republic and Roman republican writers such as Cicero and Livy.)

In his version of Aristotle's political theory (p.66-76), Pocock presents it as concerned with the problem of unifying a society of individuals, each of whom has different, or potentially different, interests. Each citizen pursues an activity or set of activities aimed at a particular goal or goals but these activities and goals are not identical and may conflict. However, being a citizen also implies a specific activity of citizenship, which is defined as taking part in the constitution of the *polis,* by sharing in the exercise of political power or 'ruling and being ruled'. Through the activity of citizenship, through participating as citizens in the constitution, they participate in a common or universal activity and thus transcend, or at least reduce the worst effects of their particularity; their virtue becomes social and politicized. Constitutions, however, may differ, depending on which interests predominate. The main divergence is between the aristocratic élite and the poor majority. Aristotle's best constitution is the *polity* or mixed constitution, a constitution which is a 'duality of aristocracy and democracy' and allows a share of power to all citizens depending on their capacity to contribute.

This reading of Aristotle, it must be pointed out, is inaccurate. For example it misrepresents Aristotle as believing that society is necessarily made up of individuals with different and conflicting desires and interests which need to be mediated through participation in government. This is far too pluralist and individualistic an interpretation of his political theory. Aristotle is not a pluralist on principle; that is, he does not see the members of every society as necessarily divided on questions of value and interest. His ideal society is one which is united in the pursuit of a common ethical ideal.[2] Each citizen may have his own personal life and private interests within his own household but these should not be seen as necessarily differing from or conflicting with those of others. True, Aristotle recognizes that in the non-ideal world such harmony will not be achieved and constitutions will have to be established which assume unreconciled social conflicts. But even in dealing with the politics of non-ideal societies, he does not base his analysis on the problems of disparate and conflicting individuals. His starting point is different *groups,* such as the rich and the poor, rather than different *individuals.*

Furthermore, Aristotle's mixed constitution, the polity, which he advocates for such a divided society, is not, as Pocock implies, the same as his ideal constitution, which is an un-mixed aristocracy of the men of true virtue. Aristotle did not believe, as Pocock claims, that all un-mixed constitutions, even the un-mixed rule of the good, were evil (p.72);[3] the ideal aristocracy was a state where all citizens equally achieved complete virtue. Again, it is wrong to claim that the polity, the mixed constitution preferred for non-ideal societies, is a duality of aristocracy and democracy. It is, rather, a combination of democracy and *oligarchy.* Oligarchy and aristocracy are quite different for Aristotle. Oligarchy is rule of the rich whereas aristocracy is rule of those with a claim to virtue. Aristotle may allow some moral and intellectual superiority to aristocrats but he does not to oligarchs.

2 R. G. Mulgan, *Aristotle's Political Theory,* Oxford, 1977, p.29.

3 The passage that Pocock refers to in support (1281a not 1280a) is a typically Aristotelian paradox or problem, requiring further discussion, and not a statement of Aristotle's own considered opinion.

The difference on which the polity is based is the social and political cleavage between rich and poor not the ideological conflict between the claims of knowledge and virtue, on the one hand, and those of the majority on the other.

To point out the inaccuracy of Pocock's account of the *Politics* is not necessarily to prove that it was not the version which was historically influential on Machiavelli and his contemporaries. It is quite possible that the Florentines read, or rather misread, Aristotle in this way. As Pocock himself argues, there are many possible approaches to the *Politics*. His own he justifies on the ground that it is 'the approach which reveals its importance to humanists and Italian thinkers in search of means of vindicating the universality and stability of the *vivere civili*' (p.167). On the other hand, the eccentricity of his reading becomes more questionable when he does not give any specific evidence to show that the Florentines *did* read Aristotle in this way. At no point does he attempt to document the influence of Aristotle by referring to direct quotations from his work or specific attributions of particular doctrines to him. His sole 'evidence' is the finding of parallels between his suggested reading of Aristotle and the arguments of the Florentine political theorists. Admittedly, the pervasive impact of Aristotle on the thought of the late middle ages and early renaissance, in which Machiavelli and his contemporaries were steeped, is well-documented and beyond question. It may therefore on occasion be reasonable to infer Aristotelian influence, direct or indirect, without a specific reference to Aristotle in the text in question. But such an inference of influence will be reasonable only where the ideas in the writer concerned show an identity or close similarity to the ideas normally attributed to Aristotle. For an unusual interpretation of Aristotle's ideas, such as Pocock's, we need definite corroborating evidence. Without such evidence, his proposed model of Aristotelianism must remain a fiction, an unsubstantiated and implausible hypothesis about the intellectual influences on Machiavelli and his contemporaries, and cannot be seen as a genuine contribution to history.

Besides being inaccurate, Pocock's account of Aristotle's political thought is also selective and omits certain aspects of Aristotle for which there are parallels in Machiavelli. For instance, when discussing *virtù*, one of the central concepts in Machiavelli's political theory, Pocock argues that Machiavelli took the republican conception of virtue requiring a life of political participation, a conception which derived from the Aristotelian model of citizenship, and by reflecting in the *Discourses* on the history of the ancient Roman republic, transformed it by making it military: the successful republic was to be based upon the military virtue of its citizens (pp.211-218). That is, he implies a sharp contrast between Aristotelian citizenship, which is essentially civil, and Roman citizenship, which was military as well as civil. Again, this is a misleading abridgement. Though Aristotle does define citizenship and the virtue of the citizen in civil rather than military terms, he still assumes that military duties are a normal part of a citizen's duties, an assumption that was shared by most Greeks of the classical period. Indeed, the origins of Greek citizenship and the political rights of citizens are to be found in the military rights and duties of a citizen militia; citizens were those free (i.e. non-slave) males who made up the army and navy of the Greek city state and who therefore asserted their right to a say in the running of that state. Aristotle himself mentions the military function as one of the essential functions of the *polis* (*Politics* VIII, 8, 1328 b 6), a function which must be performed by the full members of the *polis*, the citizens. In his ideal state the citizens spend their younger adult years upon military service before taking over the civil administra-

tion of the city (VII, 9, 1329 a 14-16). In his ethical theory, the virtue of courage is a virtue primarily displayed on the battle field (*Nicomachean Ethics,* III, 6). More important, considering Pocock's interest in the mixed constitution and the citizen militia, Aristotle's second-best state, the polity, is a mixed constitution based on the middle class, men who may not achieve complete virtue but should possess military virtue because they provide the heavy-armed infantry or hoplites in the citizen army (III 7, 1279 b 1-4). Thus there is already a significant military aspect to the Greeek and Aristotelian conception of citizenship which Machiavelli and other Florentines would have encountered in their reading of Greek political thought. To exclude this aspect from the Aristotelian model, as Pocock does, implies that the emphasis Machiavelli gives to the military role of citizens is more original than it may have been. As before, we must admit the possibility that the Florentines' reading of the ancients was partial and selective. But, again, without documentary evidence, the model remains unsubstantiated and implausible.

Another, and more important omission, is Pocock's complete neglect of Aristotle's analysis of political change and advice on how to achieve political stability which occupies two of the eight books of the *Politics* (Books 5 and 6). In this section, Aristotle begins by identifying the factors which lead to political instability and constitutional change. He discusses first a number of factors which apply generally to all constitutions and then factors which especially affect particular types of constitution, such as democracies, oligarchies and aristocracies. Having identified the causes of political change, he then gives advice to lawmakers and politicians about how to preserve their constitutions from such change. A similar analysis, first the factors leading to change and then the methods for avoiding change, is also provided for monarchy (which includes both kingship, the good form, and tyranny, the bad form). It is in the advice to statesmen, particularly the tyrant, that parallels between Aristotle and Machiavelli are most marked. As an illustration we may compare the following pairs of passages:[4]

He [the tyrant] should plan and adorn his city as if he were not a tyrant but a trustee for its benefit. He should always show a particular zeal in the cult of the gods. Men are less afraid of being treated unjustly by a ruler, when they think that he is god-fearing and pays some regard to the gods. Aristotle, *Politics* V, 9, (1314 b 37-1315 a 2)

He [the prince] should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, guileless and devout. . . . To those seeing and hearing him, he should appear a man of compassion, a man of good faith, a man of integrity, a kind and religious man. And there is nothing so important as to seem to have the last quality. Machiavelli, *The Prince,* ch. 18.

and

He [the tyrant] should also honour good men in any walk of life; and he should do so in such a way as to make them think that they could not possibly have been honoured more by their own fellow-citizens, if their fellow-citizens had been free to distribute honours themselves. He should distribute such honours personally; but should leave all punishments to be inflicted by the magistrates or the law courts. Aristotle, *Politics* V, 11, (1315 a 4-8)

I conclude therefore that when a prince has the goodwill of the people he should not worry

4 Translations from the *Politics* are by E. Barker, Oxford, 1947; from the *Prince* by G. Bull, London, 1961; and from the *Discourses* by L. J. Walker, London, 1950, revised 1975.

about conspiracies; but when the people are hostile and regard him with hatred he should go in fear of everything and everyone. . . . Princes should delegate to others the enactment of unpopular measures and keep in their own hands the distribution of favours.

Machiavelli, *The Prince,* ch. 19

and finally,

A tyrant should always remember that a state is composed of two sections—the poor and the rich. If it is possible, both of these sections should be induced to think that it is the tyrant's power which secures them in their position, and prevents either from suffering injury at the hands of the other. If, however, one of the sections is stronger than the other, the tyrant should attach that section particularly to his side.

Aristotle, *Politics* V, 11, (1315 a 31-6)

It follows that those who have the public as a whole for their friends and the nobles for their enemies are the more secure, in that their violence is backed by a greater force than it is in the case of those who have the populace for an enemy and the nobility for a friend.

Machiavelli, *Discourses,* I.40.11

The supposition that Machiavelli was directly influenced by Aristotle's discussion of constitutional change,[5] particularly the section on tyrants, is confirmed by the fact that the one explicit reference to Aristotle in the whole of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* is a reference to one of the causes of instability in tyrannies. 'Among the primary causes of the downfall of tyrants, Aristotle puts the injuries they do on account of women, whether by rape, violation or the breaking up of marriages'. (Machiavelli, *Discources,* III.26.2)

Pocock's omission of this evidence cannot be excused on the ground that the subject matter is not germane to his theme. On the contrary, political stability is central to the 'Machiavellian moment', as he defines it: 'It is a name for the moment in conceptualised time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability' (p.viii). Moreover, this similarity between Aristotle and Pocock's view of Machiavelli goes beyond a common interest in political stability. It also extends to the general world-view on which the treatment of the subject is based. According to Pocock, Machiavelli rejected the medieval view of the secular world as the realm of either immemorial custom or meaningless flux. The prince was an innovator who could impose a degree of order on chaos. The 'key to the thought of *Il Principe* is Machiavelli's perception that behaviour in such situations is partly predictable, so that strategies for acting in them may be devised; his great originality is that of a student of de-legitimised politics' (p.163). But this view of the nature of politics is not unlike Aristotle's. Aristotle held that the sublunary world of human experience is neither entirely predictable nor entirely unpredictable; generalizations may be made about it, but they are generalizations which hold true 'for the most part' only. Consequently, political strategies may be devised which are not fool-proof but will hold good in most cases.[6] Thus, Aristotelian metaphysics and epistemology support Machiavelli's view which, according to Pocock, was not shared by Machiavelli's medieval predecessors, that the secular world is not uniformly chaotic and that shrewd and perceptive observers may impose some, though not complete, order upon it.

5 Cf. W. L. Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle,* Oxford, 1887-1902, IV, 470, 472, 475. L. J. Walker, *The Discourses of Niccolo Machiavelli,* London, 1950, II, 273-7.

6 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* I, 3 (1084 b 23-7); *Politics,* VII, 7 (1328 a 19-21).

Machiavelli's advances in political theorizing could well be seen as due, at least in part, to the rediscovery of the Aristotelian approach to the study of political change. Here, again, the careful historian would need, however, to be cautious in attributing direct influence. Much of the influence of Aristotelian ideas discovered in Machiavelli would be indirect rather than direct, conveyed through scholastic writers such as Aquinas with whose writing Machiavelli was closely acquainted. At any rate, we may still conclude that evidence for Aristotelian influence on Machiavelli is most firm in the analysis of political change and that Pocock's attempted account of such influence is vitiated by neglect of this evidence.[7]

To trace the intellectual influences, direct or indirect, on Machiavelli or assess the extent of his originality in the history of political thought is beyond the scope of this note or the competence of its author. The purpose has been essentially negative, to question the plausibility of Pocock's version of Aristotle's influence on Machiavelli by demonstrating the inaccuracy and partiality of his account of Aristotle, his omission of important parallels between the two authors and his failure to provide evidence for which must remain a highly idiosyncratic and speculative foray into intellectual history.

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7 A further case in which Pocock exaggerates the originality of Machiavelli by a partial account of an ancient source is his treatment of Polybius. In his Book Six, which was used by Machiavelli when writing the *Discourses,* Polybius refers to two examples of an ideally mixed constitution. One is Sparta, which had been established at one stroke by a single, divinely inspired legislator, Lycurgus; the other is Rome, which had evolved gradually by the discipline of many struggles and troubles, always choosing the best by the light of the experience gained in disaster (Polybius VI.10). Pocock, however, in his account of Machiavelli's use of Polybius (pp.189-90), does not clearly attribute to Polybius the discovery that Rome achieved a perfectly mixed constitution by experience and without the intervention of a divine legislator. He thus gives the impression that Machiavelli may have discovered this himself when reflecting on the facts presented by Polybius. 'Machiavelli has carried out a drastic experiment in secularization. He has *established* [italics added] that civic virtue and the *vivere civile* may . . . develop entirely in the dimension of contingency, without the intervention of timeless agencies. The goal defined by Polybius and achieved by Lycurgus may still be to escape from time and change, but there are circumstances in which citizens move towards this goal through the efforts of their time-bound selves. The interesting case is not that of Sparta . . . it is that of Rome, where the goal was achieved—as nearly as men can achieve it—by the disorderly and chance-governed actions of particular men in the dimension of contingency and fortune' (p.190).