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Discourses on Livy
Machiavelli

Study Guide on Niccolò Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

Machiavelli titles his work *Discourses on Livy*, Livy being an ancient Roman historian. Yet in the Preface, he claims to have taken a path “as yet untrodden by anyone” (5¹). What exactly is new about the *Discourses*? What role will history play in the project, and how is it different from how it has hitherto been used? (Consider especially the Preface.)

What is meant by “freedom” in this work? What exactly does it include? Consider especially Chapters 16–18, as well as the following:

- “The desires of free peoples are rarely pernicious to freedom because they arise either from being oppressed or from suspicion that they may be oppressed” (17).
- “[The common utility drawn from a free way of life] is being able to enjoy one’s things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honor of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself” (45).
- “He will find that a small part of [the people] desires to be free so as to command, but all the others, who are infinite, desire freedom so as to live secure” (46).

What seems to be the objective of political rule in this work? How does it compare with that found in *The Prince*? Consider the general nature of his recommendations, as well as the primary goods he considers.

What role does religion play in ordering a republic or principate, according to Machiavelli?

- Consider what Machiavelli says about Numa and religion in the Roman state (I.11). For example:
 - “Whoever considers well the Roman histories sees how much religion served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good, to bring shame to the wicked” (34–35).

¹ Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Discourses on Livy*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- “I conclude that the religion introduced by Numa was among the first causes of the happiness of that city” (35).
- What major benefits does Machiavelli emphasize in I.13, 14, and 15?

What notion of the common good does Machiavelli espouse in this work? Does achieving it feature prominently in his political recommendations? Depending on your answer, how does this fit with Machiavelli’s ends in *The Prince*?

- “[Internal conflicts] have engendered not any exile or violence unfavorable to the common good but laws and orders in benefit of public freedom” (16).
- “So a prudent orderer of a republic, who has the intent to wish to help not himself but the common good, not for his own succession but for the common fatherland, should contrive to have authority alone . . .” (29).
- “That Romulus was of those . . . and that what he did was for the common good and not for his own ambition . . .” (29). (See also p. 30.)

Within the sphere of politics, do the prince’s ends justify his means? Is there anything which Machiavelli sees as forbidden to the prince by the very nature of the act?

- “In every decision of ours, we should consider where are the fewer inconveniences and take that for the best policy, because nothing entirely clean and entirely without suspicion is ever found” (22).
- “It is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him; and when the effect is good, as was that of Romulus, it will always excuse the deed” (29).
- See also pp. 12, 31, 50, 54.

“It is necessary . . . to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it” (15). What implications does this judgment have for Machiavelli’s political analysis and counsel?

What practical effects does Machiavelli see coming from the tension and strife between different “humors” in the state? In what ways are they harmful? Is it possible to reconcile the “beneficial results” of social strife with the common good, which would seem to demand civil peace?



- “[I]n every republic are two diverse humors, that of the people and that of the great, and that all the laws that are made in favor of freedom arise from their disunion” (16).
- “So there is nothing that makes a republic so stable and steady as to order it in a mode so that those alternating humors that agitate it can be vented in a way ordered by the laws” (24).
- “[G]ood examples arise from good education, good education from good laws, and good laws from those tumults that many inconsiderately damn” (16).

“[S]o many accidents arose in it [Rome] through the disunion between the plebs and the Senate that what an orderer had not done, chance did” (14). What role does chance play generally in Machiavelli’s account of the forces which shape a republic? How is this shown in the history of Rome?

Has Christianity changed the nature of government? What differences, if any, can be seen in Machiavelli’s treatment of pagan and Christian government? Consider especially I.12.

Consider Machiavelli’s description of how governments arose among men in the beginning, and how they progress through different regimes: “These variations of governments arise by chance among men. For since the inhabitants were sparse in the beginning of the world . . .” (11–13). What does this vision reveal about Machiavelli’s view of the world? Is this description based on historical evidence, speculation, or something of both? If regime change is natural and inevitable, what does this mean for the ruler of a state?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

