Notes on Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

1. Book One
    a. Preface
        i. With not much modesty, NM claims that he is about to do what no one has done before: offer up a historical study of Rome as represented by Livy, with an eye to encouraging political virtue among contemporary statesmen.
        ii. Every rich man wants to adorn his house with a classical statue, NM reminds us, but few if any want to model classical virtue. Political life, as NM sees it, is in no way characterized by a desire to imitate the statecraft of antiquity. Here he seems to come quite close to a stereotypical ideal of "Renaissance" political theory.
        iii. It is not so much the weakening effects of the "present religion" (!) that cause this state of affairs, but rather a lack of knowledge of history. NM is here making use of a contestable, loaded sense of history: it is not simply a repository of factoids, but rather a well of "utility" when we can draw up politically expedient qualities for our imitation and edification.
            1. Question: To what degree are NM's political-theoretical insights in this work tainted by his utility-extraction view of history? Can we have a Machiavellian statecraft without a utilitarian historiography?
    b. 1.1
        i. After making an uninteresting point about how cities can be founded by natives or foreigners, NM makes the more intriguing claim that the founders of cities are "free" when (a) they do not depend on anyone else for the founding of their city and (b) their people are 'constrained' either by the harshness of the land or by the strictures of the laws. There is a surprising correlation between the freedom of the founders and the constraints placed on the people.
        ii. If, as in the case of Rome or Alexandria, the climate and location of the city is agreeable, then the laws must be harsh enough that they impose "necessities" on the people that would not be there otherwise. So if you live in a place where farming is easy, you should have to undergo military exercises to toughen you up. Otherwise, the city will collapse into idleness and decadence. The glory of Rome was that this collapse was postponed for quite a while, all thanks to strict laws.
        iii. The goal of the first book is to examine this greatness of Rome insofar as it was a result of internal, public counsel.
    c. 1.2
        i. NM next turns to the question of what kind of Republic (or form of government) Rome really was. In doing so, he begins with the classical sixfold typology: principality—aristocracy—polity, tyranny—oligarchy—democracy ("the licentious").

ii. However, here he throws in a monkey-wrench. It turns out that all six forms of government are 'bad,' in a sense. Three are bad in themselves, but even the three 'good' forms are bad in that they are inescapably impermanent. Their very fragility and instability means that they cannot really be trusted, and so aiming for a pure form of any of those three will lead to a city's downfall—either now or later.
iii. This tempestuous fragility of governments is borderline inevitable for NM. All republics are caught up in this "cycle," he argues. This goes back to the drama of the first beginnings of human community, and most political histories attest to the fact of instability giving way to revolution.
iv. So what's the solution? The best constitution is the mixed constitution, as Sparta first showed and as Rome perfected. The strength of mixed governance lies in the fact that it aims to take the best from each other form of government, therefore reinforcing its defenses against an otherwise inevitable decline into revolution and disorder.
v. The reason that Rome hit upon this perfect balance, however, is nothing more than chance. NM does not take any disturbing steps toward ethical exceptionalism here. It is the happenstance of Rome's historical revolutions that led to an odd mixing of different aspects of governance, and this odd mixture turned out to be uniquely stable. That's all.

d. 1.4
i. NM pushes back against the usual claim that Rome was undone by the competition between its elites and its people, the Senate and the plebs. In fact, NM thinks that the social tension between those groups, potentially leading to disorder and even violence, engendered the very laws that preserved the freedom of Roman society as a whole.
ii. So it's not very much about peace at all!
Rather: inequality—discord—strife—law—freedom!
iii. All of this is based on NM's "humours" theory of the body politic, also seen in The Prince. The two humours (nobility and people) must be balanced out properly here.

e. 1.5
i. Once a republic is on the path to freedom in this way, how can it go about preserving said freedom? Which of the two humours is less volatile than the other, in other words?
ii. The People are less volatile than the Nobility. Most tumult, for NM, results from the nobility's fear of losing what they have, rather than the people desiring to get more than they have. This acquisitiveness on the part of the people usually arises only in response to overly combative, protective acts on the part of the nobles.
iii. The advice of following Rome—and so making the people the guardians of freedom—works best if one wishes to run a republic so that it will turn into an empire. If you want to simply preserve a republic in its own limited scope, then you might be fine imitating Sparta or Venice.

f. 1.6
   i. "… one inconvenience can never be suspended without another's cropping up." This is a general maxim of human social life.
   ii. No social or political endeavour is ever really "clean." Therefore, we should pick whichever plan is least messy and most expedient within a given political situation.
   iii. Ideals of stability, steadiness, and balance are all well and good, but NM thinks that political history reveals them as illusions, mockeries. If our goal is to keep a republic alive and healthy, it must be in motion. That is: the republic must grow. Peace, tranquillity, stasis: these are signs of death, not political vivacity.
      1. Cf. the cryptic remarks at the beginning of Plato's Timaeus. Socrates wants to see the polis in action. And what is that? The polis at war.
      2. Rome is thus the perfect exemplar here: the republic that becomes an empire. The city full of internal strife that commutes that energy into external consumption—growth, expansion, generation of new tension, and therefore an engine of "freedom!"

g. 1.13
   i. On the Roman model, religion is to be used to tamp down and control tensions when necessary or appropriate. Of course, constructive tension remains a good thing, but the manipulation of religion is a tool that can be used to channel such tension productively.

h. 1.18
   i. Even if a city is founded with proper "orders" (i.e., aspects of government, e.g., Senate, tribunes, etc.) and laws, corruption will set in over time. Call it political entropy.
   ii. In order to stave off such corruption, it is necessary not just to come up with new laws (as most states do) but also with new orders (as few states are willing to do). Even Rome could have prolonged its health by showing flexibility with regard to its orders (i.e., changing around its internal political make-up), rather than adding on new anti-corruption laws.

i. 1.19
   i. Can a state survive a weak leader? Yes—but not multiple weak leaders in a row! Contextual factors may keep the state afloat for a short time, but after that it will need new leadership that can demonstrate both prudence and force. Without prudence or arms, the state is doomed to serve as a slave to chance.

j. 1.21
   i. NM doubles down on the necessity of force for good civic leadership. To rely on foreign (or mercenary) arms is to ensure the weakness of any republic.

k. 1.25
   i. When instituting social reforms to make the city more "free," the leadership should retain as much of the old names, titles, trappings as possible. In other words: cloak your new freedom in tradition! The people

mostly notice what seems to be the case rather than what is. Therefore, let them think things are the same, while in fact you subtly, freely redefine the social order around them.

l. 1.30
    i. Under a principality, the leader should go out on military expeditions himself. Otherwise, he will incur ingratitude and wrath from the people.
    ii. Under a republic, all citizens should be involved in military service, leading to a proliferation of heroes and a general diffusion of gratitude.

m. 1.32
    i. Don't wait until times of war to give sweetener-benefits to those you need to help you, whether nobles or the people. Keep them sated with benefits in advance, so that they will be all the readier to defend the city—and their necessities—when the enemy arrives.

n. 1.33
    i. If there is a perceived threat within the city—especially a specific person—it is best to "temporize" (delay) rather than strike an early blow. The reason is that striking too soon might actually make the effect of that person's resistance all the more influential. Better to wait and see if they flame out on their own. If, after biding your time, you still must strike against them, then so be it.

o. 1.34
    i. Against many who would see the office of the Dictator as the beginning of the end for the Roman Republic, NM sees it as a great strength. All republics, he says, should have these extraordinary offices which can wield absolute power for a set time. And if that time is indefinitely stretched out, that simply means the republic is becoming an empire. And, as we saw, changes in 'political orders' and aspects of governance are all to the health of the state…

p. 1.38
    i. One of the worst weaknesses of any republic is an irresolute character. Yes, it is true, the political arena offers up many situations drenched in doubt. But the strength of the republic is to make a resolute decision even when doubt is present. To do so is to make a free decision, rather than one that is simply motivated by force—the force of necessity.
        1. Interesting combination of advice here: in some internal cases, delay and suspense are recommended. In many external cases (only external ones?), decisive action—even in the face of doubt and a lack of information—is praised.

q. 1.40
    i. As with the Dictatorship, so with the Decemvirate, it is best for magistrates to be elected by the People, rather than created of their own accord. However, even if the People do get to create a new office via election, they must ensure that they are not giving criminal license to whoever occupies that office.

r. 1.44
    i. The Many without a Head is useless. This is an unsurprising remark by NM, especially given his stated love for the mixed constitution.
    ii. If you're going to ask for some new power, don't let your enemies know what you're going to do with it before you have it.
s. 1.45
    i. From a ruler's point of view, it remains necessary to observe even the laws that you yourself have created. To do otherwise is to negate the force of law in the first place.
    ii. Likewise, if the ruler is offended and must take action, he should do so right away, then follow up by reassuring the rest of the people that they won't be harmed next. To keep the people in a state of continual fear is to sow sedition—and make it harder to destroy certain members of the populace when expedient. One could also aim never to injure anyone, of course, but that is hardly sound advice!
        1. Compare the advice in The Prince. This is far from pacifism, but not quite a justification for ruling by fear, either.
t. 1.49
    i. Rome, a city founded free from within, has nevertheless had difficulty finding the right laws with which to prolong its survival and success. A city that is founded on the basis of some other state will be in a much direr position. (The colony is poorly placed to shore itself up through its own independent laws, for example.)
u. 1.50
    i. No one council or magistrate should have the power to stop the actions of cities, even if it is apparently for the public good. (cf. the veto?)
v. 1.52
    i. Rather than striking a reactive pose to those who would try to rise up and seize control of the city, it is better to anticipate how such people will try to rise to the top. Then policies can be found to channel their energies and keep them under control. Think of Soderini: he was such a populist that it was easy to keep him from seizing absolute power by taking the kinds of moves that would undermine a populist.
w. 1.53
    i. The People are often swayed more by what appears to be good than what is actually good for them. The rulers can thus play with the realm of appearance so as to sway the People this way or that.
    ii. There are two dichotomies to consider here: gain and loss; spirited and cowardly. The People will always take a loss as a gain if it is presented to them as a gain 'in a spirited manner.' For who would want to be a coward?
x. 1.54
    i. One effective way to manipulate the masses is to find someone who "appears" serious, reverend, and authoritative. The appearance of such a man can be used to restrain and redirect the energy of the restless multitude.

y. 1.57
   i. The People, in many ways, would seem to have all the power. If amassed together for a singular purpose, no other aspect of the city could withstand them. And yet, at the same time, the People without a Head are weak, aimless, easily dissipated.
   ii. The ruler, if under assault from the People, must then simply withstand the first thrust. If he can do that, then the People will lose their spiritedness (*thumos*), begin to doubt themselves, cease to trust one another, and be paralyzed by fear of the princely punishment.
   iii. All together are mighty; all separate are utterly weak. If the People rise up, they need a new head. If the head wants to stay on the body politic, he must prevent another head from taking his place.

z. 1.58
   i. Yet, because of this very weakness of the People, we have less to fear from the People than from a bad Prince. The unshackled People look destructive, but we really fear them because they might lead to a tyrant. A bad prince, meanwhile, is essentially already a tyrant.
   ii. The People are at least still aimed at the common good. They fear its usurpation by one man (or a few). Their means may be rough; the ends they have in mind may be scattered; but the general orientation of the People toward the common good remains.
      1. Cf. later modern political theorists, like Rousseau, who preserve the link between the People and the Common Good, even when so many particular instances would seem to argue to the contrary.
      2. Basic idea: the People never lose their orientation to the Common Good, even if they are sometimes wrong about what the common good actually is. (JJR)
   iii. The longevity of a state, then, depends not on whether it is a principality or a republic, but upon whether it is governed by the rule of laws. The rule of good laws (flexible based upon context and history) can keep both kinds of government—or, even better, a mixed government—alive and healthy for some time, at least.

2. Book Two
   a. Preface
      i. NM begins Book Two on an introspective note. By praising all of this political virtue in ancient Rome, is he not simply devolving into antiquarian nostalgia? Many complain about the present by comparing it to an idealized past, but their ideals may not correlate to the past reality. Often the present epoch does indeed represent an improvement on what came before. But our incomplete knowledge of the past allows us to preserve only the best of it—only the exemplars of virtue, against which we then measure the mediocrity of today. This is not a reasonably grounded way of doing things.
      ii. All the same, NM concedes that the political 'virtue' of the Roman Republic and Empire is beyond debate. And so, in this one, limited case, he feels justified in looking to it for exemplars. Even though he himself

does not see such ancient learning being put into practice any time soon, he hopes that the youth of the future will be better situated to act on his ideas.

1. As part of his prefatory remarks, NM includes a history of imperial virtue, transitioning from the ancient Mesopotamian Empires to Rome, then being "scattered" across the Franks, the Turks, and more recently the German HRE. The situation for the Italians and Greeks is much worse, however, since they face a present epoch defined by subjugated to external forces: either the ultramontane French / HRE or the Muslim Turk. The underlying idea here is that vice and virtue always exist in about the same measure throughout history; it is only their locations that shift.
2. In making these estimations, NM also re-invokes his idea that all human affairs are always "in motion." This means that political states, too, must be seen as dynamic: ascending or descending over given stretches of time. The political theorist must account not just for the fact of such 'political motion' but perhaps even its desirability.
    a. Cf. here not just Socrates' 'state in motion' in the Timaeus, but also the method of Hobbes and others: to launch political theory from a material-mechanical basis….

b. II.i
    i. Ultimately, the point of Book Two will be to transition from Rome's internal relations to its external relations. This coincides with a move from the republic to the empire.
    ii. So: how did Rome acquire its empire? By fortune or by virtue?
    iii. Although many have said 'by fortune' (perhaps: by context, conditions?), NM is convinced that virtue played a large part. At the very least, prudence and virtue were baked in to the recipe alongside fortune. Many things can appear to be consequences of 'fortune,' even though they are situations created by previous acts of political virtue (or prowess).
    iv. What motivated all of this political virtue among the Romans? An insatiable desire to defend their "freedom" …

c. II.ii
    i. The spirited political virtue—*virtù* endowed with *thumos*—of the Romans was indeed driven by this thirst for freedom. Political freedom was first the independence to decide internal policy, free of outside influence. But the furtherance of freedom was the expansion of political power to influence other areas. Freedom does not hold back; it dominates.
    ii. The ancients, in short, loved their freedom. To NM, it seems clear that they loved their freedom far more than any of his contemporaries. Why would that be the case? When did 'we' lose our taste for freedom?
    iii. Here NM offers up a controversial response: Europe's taste for freedom has diminished as the interpreters of its religion—Christianity—have emphasized passive traits rather than active force.

iv. It's worth quoting: "Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men."
    1. More fully: "Our religion [Christianity] has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human; the other [ancient religion] placed it in greatness of spirit, strength of body, and all other things capable of making men very strong. And if our religion asks that you have strength in yourself, it wishes you to be more capable of suffering than of doing something strong. This mode of life thus seems to have rendered the world weak and given it in prey to criminal men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity of men, so as to go to paradise, think more of enduring the beatings than of avenging them. And although the world appears to be made effeminate and heaven disarmed, it arises without doubt more from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue."

v. As a result, the world has grown "weak" and even "effeminate" (!). 'Manly' virtue has given way to passive patience. Good Christians await the eschaton rather than fighting for their land, for freedom in the here and now.

vi. The fault cannot, of course, lie with Christianity itself. Rather, it lies with bad interpreters and educators. Men of cowardice have taught Christianity as a religion of "idleness," instead of a call to virtue.

vii. States that live according to idleness and passivity meet predictable ends, argues NM. Vigorous, virtuous, thumotic states, on the other hand, grow and attain empire—make profits and multiple riches. The real state, the state in motion, should look like the latter.

d. II.iii
    i. Say we have a republic that would like to expand and become an empire. How should it go about accomplishing that goal? Two modes of expansion are to be pursued equally:
        1. Growth via Love: the imperial-aspirant city should be welcoming to all foreigners who wish to inhabit it and join in its imperial mission.
        2. Growth via Force: the city should also forcefully expand at the expense of surrounding cities (obviously).

e. II.iv
    i. When eating up these new cities, the imperial center has three options for absorbing them:
        1. As Partners (the "Swiss" model)
        2. As Quasi-Partners (the "Roman" model)
            a. This model looks an awful lot like a 'mixed' mode. One gathers in new areas as partners in empire, while slyly preserving certain command privileges for the center itsef.
        3. As Dominated Subjects (the "Spartan" model)

f. II.vi
    i. What can we learn from Roman warmongering? A lot, presumably: one of Rome's key innovations was to come up with new, prudent ways of waging wars, even if those ways differed from universal consensus. Some tips would be:
        1. Fight "short and massive" wars. (cf. shock and awe?)
        2. Distribute booty to the benefit of the state treasury.
        3. Establish colonies.
g. II.ix
    i. Often times, Roman wars would start with a strategic assault on a people under the protection of an ally. That way, you can draw your supposed ally into a new conflict without directly vitiating the terms of a treaty.
h. II.x
    i. Money is not the sinew of war! That is: it is easier to get gold if you have good soldiers than it is to get good soldiers if all you have is gold. This continues an earlier line of Machiavellian thought: it is best to build up a loyal fighting force from within, rather than trying to buy mercenary loyalties.
i. II.xii
    i. When looking at states, it is important to consider whether their populace is armed or not. The ancient Romans and the contemporary Swiss both keep their people militarized constantly, whereas states like France and the Italian city-states spend money to raise armies when necessary. The former kind of states should avoid far-flung wars and slowly expand from their center of power outward; the latter should aim to engage only in far-off wars, since their soft center remains so vulnerable.
j. II.xv
    i. Slow, ambiguous decisions must be avoided at all costs. They are products of lack of force and lack of *thumos*. A republic won't turn into an empire by refusing to become resolute.
k. II.xix
    i. When acquiring new territories, it is absolutely essential that the conquering state imposes the right political orders—usually based on this Roman model. Otherwise, the gains will not be true gains.
l. II.xx
    i. Once again: don't rely on mercenary or auxiliary troops! Military power should be grounded from within.
m. II.xxvii
    i. Imperial conquest should be sufficient in and of itself. There is no need to add gloating or hubris or over-consumption to the mix. Often, healthy imperial expansion is actually impeded by such pride-fuelled overreach.
n. II.xxviii
    i. States must take account even of personal affronts, lest (again) personal vices and foibles and squabbles interfere with sound policy.

o. II.xxix
    i. Sometimes, fortune remains the most decisive factor in political history. It is as if fortune herself—or the heavens themselves—select for virtuous or vicious men as needed. When fortune favours a situation, it 'elects' a virtuous man who will prudently see the conditions fortune has furnished for him. When fortune disfavors a situation, it will elect a leader who is blind to the conditions of fortune. "Men can second fortune, but not oppose it." Still, fortune is obscure, and so there's no real need to give up hope entirely. Just know that there are larger factors at work here.

3. Book Three
    a. III.i
        i. We now come to the topic of the renewal of regimes. For NM, change is inevitable: are human things are always in motion. The question is how to manage change for the sake of the overall longevity of the whole.
        ii. The safest way to manage change is this: to periodically renew a regime by drawing it back towards its beginnings. There is safety in the origin.
        iii. This doesn't mean actually going back in time or 'primitivizing' society, but instead coming up with new political orders that renew and re-energize the spirit of the regime, as communicated in its founding.
        iv. Such renewal can come via external accident (a transformative invasion) or internal prudence.
        v. One model for this renewal would actually be the renewal of Christianity itself by the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century. What we need are periodic appearances of the political equivalents of Franciscans and Dominicans!
        vi. Having set up this new topic, NM proceeds to offer particular cases of internally motivated societal renewal, since this is a safer course of action than waiting for a foreign invasion to spur on innovation.
    b. III.iii
        i. As the case of Roman history after the original Brutus shows, it is necessary to commit mass and "memorable" executions after a 'renewal' of state—a 'revolution,' we might say. Kill the enemies of the new order to ensure its renewed longevity.
    c. III.iv
        i. Similarly, no leader should feel comfortable in his position if the previous leader is still alive. Solution: kill them.
    d. III.v
        i. Leaders who inherit their power most readily lose it by beginning to disobey the laws. It's actually easier to obey the laws and hold onto power than it is to try to usurp the law and become its master.
    e. III.vi
        i. Few are in the position to topple princes through open warfare, but almost anyone can take part in a conspiracy against such leaders. But is there a political science of conspiracies?
        ii. It would be best to keep conspiracies small: no more than three or four men, all situated close to the leader. If there are more than that, news will

leak out. If any two conspirators are captured, the whole game is over, since their stories will seldom corroborate.

iii. Other advice for conspirators: have a stable plan; do not switch jobs around; ensure that everyone executing the plan has sufficient *thumos* and prudence; kill all family members of the leader, as well, so that no one will be left to avenge the deceased.

iv. It is less risky to attempt a conspiracy against a republic than against a prince. Often, one can flirt with the idea of a coup, then rely on one's privileges as a citizen to escape death.

v. From the other side of things: sometimes it is best to wait and see how a conspiracy develops before crushing it, so that you can get a better idea of who is involved. But if the conspiracy seems small and weak, crush it right away.

1. It's fascinating that NM spends so much time exploring the ins and outs of conspiracies. He begins by reaffirming that he advises only obedience to the present authorities, but then provides a detailed road-map concerning how to kill a prince!

f. III.vii

i. Violent political change is most likely to come about if there is reason for vengeance, such as when the city was originally founded through acts of bloodshed and appropriation.

g. III.xvii

i. Don't insult a bureaucrat and then put him in charge of something crucial.

h. III.xix

i. If commanding partners, sway them with compliance. If commanding subjects, sway them with punishment. But even then, punish with moderation. For a prince should not court hatred!

ii. "to make oneself hated never turns out well for any prince…"

iii. This moderates the stereotype of NM as always advising princes to court the fear (and therefore hatred?) of the people in order to maintain power.

i. III.xxiv

i. Administrative positions should have short durations, especially in a republic. 'Prolongation of command' is a slippery slope toward social dissolution.

j. III.xxv

i. Virtuous poverty should also be cultivated amongst the citizens, even those with political power. Concentration of wealth is to the active detriment of republican cohesion.

ii. The only question is how best, in any given context, to encourage such 'wealth redistribution.'

k. III.xxvi

i. Abuse of women by people in power is one of the most common causes of social dissolution.

l. III.xxvii
    i. In addition to social dissolution, we must also speak of social reunification. It is not true that a divided city is a healthy city. Nor is it true that a conquered city is best held if kept divided.
    ii. And so: how best to reunify a divided city? Kill those who are leading its divisions!
m. III.xxxii
    i. Often there are many who want to disrupt any possibility of peace. One common way to achieve this goal is to treat the opposing side so brutally (e.g., by torturing prisoners of war) that they will never be able to agree to peace with your side.
n. III.xli
    i. Regardless of the particularities of all these forms of governance, one driving impulse remains true: the Fatherland must be defended at all costs. This means that all moral concerns fall away in the face of an absolute duty to preserve the Fatherland itself.
    ii. NM: "where one deliberates entirely on the safety of his fatherland, there ought not to enter any consideration of either just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; indeed, every other concern put aside, one ought to follow entirely the policy that saves its life and maintains its liberty."
    iii. It would be difficult to imagine a stauncher defense of the supremacy of state sovereignty!
o. III.xlii
    i. Should promises made under duress be kept? No—once the force that pressured them is gone, such promises may be broken.
    ii. Furthermore—and more disturbingly—any political promises whatsoever may be broken, provided that the causes that led to them in the first place have now disappeared.
p. III.xlvi
    i. Education is crucial in shaping the political values and behaviours of the next generation of citizens. This may vary across families, but the variance resides not in bloodlines or cheap genetics. It is all about the formation of young minds to value certain modes of political action over others.
q. III.xlvii
    i. The aforementioned love of fatherland must come before any perceived private grievances of any particular citizen.
r. III.xlix
    i. Prudence and foresight are crucial to the survival of a regime. This is because fortune will continue to hurl accidents at it; no game-plan can survive for long. As always, motion and change are the norm. Because of this, the political regime must be able to think on its feet, fitting its political *virtù* in a spirited (thumotic) manner to each new situation. And that is the work of prudent foresight.