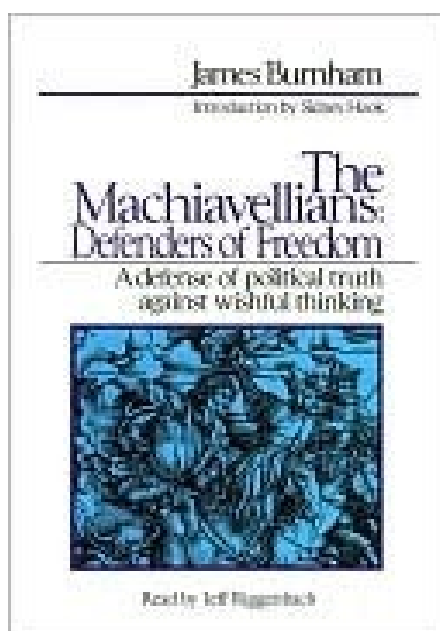




The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom

James Burnham

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The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom James Burnham

This classic work of political theory and practice offers an account of the modern Machiavellians, a remarkable group who have been influential in Europe and practically unknown in the United States. The book devotes a long section to Machiavelli himself as well as to such modern Machiavellians as Gaetano Mosca, Georges Sorel, Robert Michels and Vilfredo Pareto. Burnham contends that the writings of these men hold the key both to the truth about politics and to the preservation of political liberty.

The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom Details

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From Reader Review The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom for online ebook

Rikhard Von Katzen says

Though his name has popped up in my readings for years I had not until recently read James Burnham. When this was recommended to me by the anarchist Keith Preston I decided to finally give it a go. I was not disappointed. It is one of the few books I've read that deals with Sorel in any detail. In addition it's got a really fascinating section on Pareto, another oft-mentioned writer I've just never got around to reading.

Patrick says

I was introduced to Burnham years ago with his "Suicide of the West" which is a better book but this one is important too.

From Amazon:

It is scandalous that this book should be out of print, for it is without a doubt the best primer on political science ever written. If you are going to read only one book on politics, this should be it. Burnham is no ideologue with an axe to grind. He merely seeks to describe how politics works in the real world of fact. In pursuit of this aim, he discusses five of the most scientifically rigorous of all political thinkers: Machiavelli, Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, and Georges Sorel. Together, these thinkers represent, according to Burnham, the Machiavellian tradition in political thought. Machiavellians, Burnham tells us, regard politics as a science devoted to describing facts as they really are, not as one may wish them to be. In a certain sense, I can understand why this book is out of print. Realism in politics is hardly popular. What most people seek for in political theory is not reality but a rationalization for their own wishful thinking.

Gwern says

The best part of the book for me was that section which is already available online, "Dante: Politics as Wish" - Burnham's convincing examination of Dante's little-known book on divine-right-monarchical politics as intellectually dishonest & servile justification of treason.

Less convincing is his idolization of Machiavelli† as a transparent writer who meant exactly what he said and had no ulterior motives or proximate politics underlurking his writings; this claim would come as quite a shock to any Straussians in the room, and also doesn't explain why some of his advice to The Prince was terrible advice or why he didn't ever try to spread it about (Dietz mentions these details as he makes the case in her 1986 paper "Trapping The Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception" that the Republican Machiavelli was dispensing deliberately bad and insane advice given the context) which rather makes one wonder what Burnham is going on about when he talks about Italy being told by Machiavelli to reunify to form a viable nation-state but refusing to.

† which actually surprised me: I had expected from the title that Burnham would go with some sort of Noble Lie theory in which Machiavellians 'manufacture consent' and defend republics or democracies from the illiberal masses

Similarly, his analyses of all politics or social movements as elite class warfare or expressions of the Iron Law of Oligarchy are interesting and I think to a large extent accepted these days (eg. the field of public choice), but his actual uses of the idea seem fairly inept. He is good enough to make a number of specific predictions... pretty much all of which are wrong.

For example, he predicts that post-WWII that the military would expand massively and form a real faction as opposed to a little 'puddle' (right) and that officers would enter the governing elites and change the composition of the ruling classes (wrong; Eisenhower was elected president, but there is no visible change in composition - few presidents or candidates have benefited from service, and contenders like Colin Powell or Wesley Clark have either not run or sunk like a stone. Congress remains a province of lawyers, and no one gets wealthy in the military until they take the revolving door), and further that his loosely defined Bonapartism is inevitable although I do not recognize Clinton, Bush, or Obama as being very Bonaparte-like figures.

On pg259-260, he presents a doozy of "scientific statements about social matters":

...Thus we now may know, with considerably probability, that: if the state absorbs under centralized control all major social forces, then political liberty will disappear; if, after this war, Europe is again divided into a considerable number of independent sovereign states, then a new war will begin in Europe within a comparatively short time; if the present plan of military strategy (i.e., submarine attrition warfare, and "island-hopping") continues unchanged in the East, then Japan will not be definitely crushed for many, many years, and perhaps never; if the present Administration plans to remain in office after 1944, then it will have to curtail political liberty further; and so on.

These statements were published in 1943, well *after* such events as the Battle of Midway (June 1942).

About the best I can say is that charitably, the counterfactual precondition for one may not have been true (if we assume 'Administration' refers to FDR, and not his Vice President, Truman, who succeeded FDR on his premature death and then was re-elected with no visible brownshirts stuffing pollboxes). The rest are simply embarrassing. The science of politics must indeed have been young... (Or perhaps there's some other common thread to the political criticism that opens and closes the book. Always a problem with authors discussing deception.)

Oolalaa says

7/20

Friedrich von Uxküll says

One of the greatest books on political theory one can have the pleasure of reading, elucidating the Machiavellian realist or amoral analysis of politics. Both an analysis of it's chief figures, their theories and a contrast of the "politics as wish" as represented by Dante. This should be in the curriculum of all political theory/philosophy/science classes, it's brevity and clarity are to be envied.

Jared Tobin says

Burnham's work is a sort of superior modern update to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. It is superior in the sense that it presents Machiavelli's own ideas, along with the ideas of many other Machiavellian thinkers, with added interpretation, examples, comparative history, context, and so on.

If one seeks to understand politics and power - either academically, to further personal aims, or just to cultivate a sense of 'political self-defense' - then understanding Machiavellian thought is *mandatory*. This book is the best resource I've yet found on that.

Stamatis Stamatopoulos says

Ένα εξαιρετικό επικίνδυνο βιβλίο. Η προσέγγιση των ιδεών που πραγματεύεται απαιτεί απ' τον αναγνώστη μεγάλη προσοχή και κριτική σκέψη. Κατ' τη γνώμη μου δεν θα πρέπει να ενοιαστεί κανείς απ' τα πράγματα βιβλίου πολιτικής φιλοσοφίας που αποφασίζει να διαβάσει κάποιος.

Phillip says

It is a long tough book but worth it.

Steve Greenleaf says

James Burnham's *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (1943, 305 p.) came into my possession in 2001 upon purchase from Great Expectations Bookstore in Evanston, Illinois. It languished--or should I say waited for me--on my shelves until last summer, when it made the cut to India. It proved its merit, and I can only regret the wait.

Burnham, better known for his *The Managerial Revolution* and then later as a writer at William F. Buckley's *National Review*, writes at a midway point in his odyssey from Trotskyite to Buckleyite. In this work, Burnham, starts by dismissing the claims of Dante's *De Monarchia* as anything other than an attempt to cover a naked political agenda. After dismissing Dante, he moves into a discussion of Dante's fellow Florentine, political realist, Niccolo Machiavelli. Burnham argues that only by knowing politics as it's actually practiced, and not how we might wish it practiced, can we obtain and hold a measure of freedom.

After discussing Machiavelli, Burnham moves forward a several centuries to discuss lesser known political thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, names familiar but not often read: Mosca (theory of the ruling class), Sorel (myth and violence), Michaels (iron law of oligarchy), and Pareto (famous for several things, but here about elites and beliefs). Each of these thinkers, early practitioners of political science as a discipline, looks at the stark realities of politics. For instance, the dominance of elites, the role of political parties (and elites within those parties), and beliefs based on something other than empirical science. In other words, how politics, even in nascent democracies, works.

Burnham's argues that only by understanding how politics actually works can we preserve a measure of freedom, and his point convinces. Naive understandings of our political system only lead to frustration and failure. These individuals and their successors, the men and women who have studied politics since this was written (and even earlier, as Pareto is the most recent thinker considered) give us greater insight into our ways of practicing politics. Of course, ideas and even ideals are important, and perhaps Burnham undervalues these, but they do not overcome many hard realities. Machiavelli, ever the fascinating character, sets the tone not as a purveyor of evil, as the naive suppose him to be, but the consummate realist. Burnham and his thinkers add to this tradition, and by doing so can help us become wiser about the political world in which we live.

Sam says

I listened to the audiobook version (a checkout from my local library) of this in my car, while driving, so I'll preface by saying that my attention wasn't entirely focused on what was being said. However, when I was paying attention, half the time I was exclaiming "what?!" or "yep" or "oh my god" as I drew parallels between the behavior described in the text and the present social and political worlds. This book is on my to-buy list now as I want to go back and really read the book.

Philip Kirkbride says

Very interesting, looks at a few different authors including an obscure work by Dante (yes that Dante) which combines both demonology and political science.

Anya Leninjav says

Excellent book, especially interesting are the sections on Pareto and Sorel.

Shyam Sundar Sridhar says

An extremely well-written book on Machiavellism, a scientific theory of politics. Starting from Machiavelli, this school of thought included people like Mosca, Sorel, Michels and Pareto. This books provides a good overview of their ideas and compiles a theory based on a combination of these thinkers. I really enjoyed reading this book.
