

## FIDEL CASTRO: A MACHIAVELLIAN PRINCE?

Alfred G. Cuzán

This essay explores the parallels and divergences between Fidel Castro and Machiavelli's self-made ruler. Much of *The Prince* deals with the problem of how a man can raise himself from private fortune or even obscure and abject origins to a position of undisputed political primacy as conqueror or founder of a new state or regime. Clearly, Fidel Castro accomplished that feat. The question before us is, how closely does Castro match the Machiavellian mold in terms of personal qualities and political methods?<sup>1</sup> Suggestively, among the works kept in Castro's small hut at his guerrilla camp in the *Sierra Maestra* in 1958 was a copy of *The Prince* (Quirk 1993, 71).<sup>2</sup>

This paper selectively mines Machiavelli's treatise with interpretive and empirical ends in mind.<sup>3</sup> That is, Machiavelli's model is used as an aid to understanding how Fidel Castro became Cuba's "revolutionary prince" (Geyer 1991). Reciprocally, Castro's

modus operandi is scanned for information helpful for empirically assessing several of Machiavelli's most important generalizations about what a ruler must do in order to make himself master of a state.<sup>4</sup> The analysis concentrates on the period encompassing the road to power and its early consolidation because, as Machiavelli argues, self-made princes "acquire their principality with difficulty but hold it with ease" (Mansfield 1998, 23).

### A PROFILE OF THE MACHIAVELLIAN PRINCE

In the opening lines of *Castruccio*, Machiavelli observes that "Those who think about it ... are amazed to find that all men, or the majority of them, who have accomplished great deeds in this world, and who have been outstanding among the men of their day, have both in their origins and their birth been humble and obscure, or have been afflicted by For-

---

1. Surprisingly, although a number of authors (see next note) have used the term "Machiavellian" to characterize Castro, it appears that no one has seen fit systematically to analyze his conduct in light of *The Prince*. A key-word search of computerized data bases turned up nothing. Also, I consulted Jorge Domínguez and Edward González by e-mail, and neither could cite any previous effort to establish Castro's Machiavellian credentials.

2. According to Pardo Llada (1989, 42), *The Prince* was one of Castro's favorite works as early as 1949. José Antonio Rasco, a classmate of Castro in secondary school and at university, says that, from Machiavelli Castro "learned to justify everything," and uses the term "Machiavellian" to characterize Castro's conduct (Rasco 1999, 430, 432—my translation). Also, Georgie Ann Geyer remarks that, beginning in 1959, Castro "proceeded to transform [Cuba] with a wave of his 'princely' Machiavellian hand in a manner never before seen in Latin America—or, for that matter, most of the world" (Geyer 1991, xv).

3. To minimize the probability of misinterpreting key passages on account of using a possibly faulty translation, I consulted several editions of *The Prince*. For quotations, I alternated between Mansfield (1998) and Skinner and Price (1988), retaining the latter's English spelling of words (e.g., "honour," "favour," etc.), because they appear to be the most self-conscious about language, each including an appendix on Machiavelli's vocabulary. Also, Skinner and Price (1988) contains useful biographical sketches of the principal historical figures mentioned in *The Prince*.

4. Machiavelli's generalizations are gleaned primarily from *The Prince* although a few correlative observations are extracted from two other works: *The Discourses* and *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca* (henceforth *Castruccio*). On Fidel Castro I have relied for the most part on Robert Quirk's biography (1993), although other sources are also cited.

tune in an extraordinary manner. Because all of them have either been exposed to wild beasts or have had such base parents that, being ashamed of them, they have made themselves sons of Jupiter or some other god..." (Bondanella and Musa 1979, 519—henceforth B&M). The Machiavellian self-made prince, then, is typically a man of obscure origins, favored by fortune, who by virtue of his extraordinary personal qualities, is able to exploit opportunities in order to seize control of a state.

Many of the qualities that Machiavelli prizes in a would-be prince are subsumed under the multi-purpose term *virtú*, which depending on context is variously translated to mean ability, competence, ingenuity, or skill; audacity, boldness, courage, impetuosity, temerity, or valor; and drive, energy, ferocity, spiritedness, or strength. The other, indispensable trait is *prudenzia* which, again depending on context, is translated as cleverness, far-sightedness, intelligence, judgement, sagacity, shrewdness, or wisdom.<sup>5</sup> A would-be prince displays these characteristics from an early age, but they are cultivated and refined by the study and practice of the art of war, for "not only does it maintain those who have been born princes but many times it enables men of private fortune to rise to that rank" (Mansfield 1998, 58). Also, an aspiring prince should study the biographies of great leaders in order "to imitate some eminent man, who himself set out to imitate some predecessor of his who was considered worthy of praise and glory, always taking his deeds and actions as a model for himself" (Skinner and Price 1988, 53—henceforth S&P).

Although necessary, *virtú* and *prudenzia* are not sufficient for princely success. As intimated above, a man needs, in addition, the favors of *fortuna*, imagined as "a woman," partial to the young and the impetuous, who "is arbiter of half our actions" (S&P, 87, 85). Without *fortuna* in his corner, a man of sterling *virtú*

and impeccable *prudenzia* will see his indefatigable efforts come to naught. Nevertheless, Machiavelli was scornful of those who would let themselves "be governed by fate" (S&P, 84). Striving to owe as little as possible to luck, a would-be prince trusts in nothing but his own *virtú* and resources, especially the ability to use force. Among those who "owed nothing to luck except the opportunity to shape the material into the form that seemed best to them" are "Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus and the like." They were "armed prophets" who succeeded against all odds because they were able to make the people "believe by force" (Mansfield, 22, 24).

Although "a less important example," Hiero of Syracuse is "worthy of mention in this context." He, too, rose from private station to become ruler of his country. Apart from the opportunity,

his success owed nothing to luck. For when the Syracusans were in desperate straits, they chose him as their general; afterwards he was deservedly made their ruler. ... He disbanded the old army and raised a new one; he abandoned the old alliances and formed new ones; and as soon as he possessed his own troops and had reliable allies he could build any edifice he wanted upon this foundation. Thus, it was very difficult for him to attain power, but not to keep it (S&P, 22).

For an aspiring prince, then, force is an indispensable resource. But not any force will do: it must be his own. Thus, Hiero, had the mercenaries of the old army "all cut to pieces" (Mansfield, 56).

Force, however, is not enough: it has to be complemented by fraud. A successful prince is one who has the astuteness necessary "to get around men's brains" (Mansfield, 69). Treachery enables the new prince to draw dangerous enemies and malcontents into deadly traps. For example, the powerful Poggio family of Lucca had originally supported Castruccio, but coming to the conclusion that "it had not been rewarded according to its merits," they "conspired with other

5. What relation there is between Machiavelli's *virtú* and *prudenzia*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the classic or Christian understanding of ethics and the virtues is a contested question. The term Machiavellian was coined by those who interpret the main message of *The Prince* to be that there is no necessary relation between the two, that the former may or should exist independently of the latter, or even transcend it. For a critical interpretation of Machiavelli, see Mansfield (1998, viii-xiii). A more sympathetic account is offered by De Grazia (1989).

families” to stir up a rebellion at a time Castruccio was away. Returning to his city, Castruccio,

placed his armed supporters in all the strategic positions. Stefano di Poggio, [who had forced his relatives to “lay down their arms,] believing that Castruccio was under an obligation to him, ... begged him on behalf of his family (but not on his own account, thinking that he needed no such mercy) to make allowances for youth and to remember the old friendship and the obligation owed to their [sic] family. To this Castruccio replied graciously and told him not to worry, saying that he was happier to see the disturbances quelled than he was angry over their beginning; and he asked Stefano to bring them all to him, saying that he thanked God for the opportunity to demonstrate his clemency and goodwill. When they had all come forward, trusting in the word of both Stefano and Castruccio, they were imprisoned and, together with Stefano, executed (B&M, 529-530).

The adroit combination of force and fraud, such as that displayed by Castruccio, is the art of imitating “the fox and the lion, because the lion does not defend itself from snares and the fox does not defend itself from wolves. So one needs to be a fox to recognize snares and a lion to frighten the wolves. Those who stay simply with the lion do not understand this” (Mansfield, 69). Although a new prince should “not depart from good, when possible,” he also needs to “know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity” (Mansfield, 70). However, to be effective, cruelties have to be “well used. Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of the necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated” (Mansfield, 37-38). Relatedly, while “it is desirable to be both loved and feared,” “it is difficult to achieve both and, if one of them has to be lacking, it is much safer to be feared than loved. . . . For love is sustained by a bond of gratitude which, because men are excessively self-interested, is broken whenever they see a chance to benefit themselves. But fear is sustained by a dread of punishment that is always effective” (S&P, 59).

The trouble the Poggi family caused Castruccio is representative of what a new prince can expect from many of his original supporters: once he has seized control of the state, they will not be easily satisfied. This is particularly true of “those who helped him to gain power” “not from natural affection for him, but only because they were discontented with the previous government.” Ironically, then, new rulers “have often found that men whom they had regarded with suspicion in the early stages of their rule prove more reliable and useful than those whom they had trusted at first” (S&P, 74). Also, wherever a new prince acquires office with the backing of his fellow citizens, his position will be more or less secure depending on whether this support rests primarily on “the great” or on the people. If he acquires a state with the support of the former, it will be difficult for the prince to consolidate his power, because he is surrounded by many who presume to be his equals. However, if he was assisted by the people, he will find “no one or very few who are not ready to obey” (Mansfield, 39).

It being difficult to maintain the great loyal, a new prince should seek the support of the people. This is relatively easy, “since they want only not to be oppressed” (S&P, 36). In order to keep the people content, all a prince needs do is to respect their women, refrain from taking their property, and hold down taxes. “If the vast majority of men are not deprived of their property and honour, they will live contentedly, and one will have to deal only with the ambition of a few men, which can be easily restrained in various ways” (S&P, 64). Also, “he should encourage the citizens to follow quietly their ordinary occupations, both in trade and agriculture and every other kind, so that one man is not afraid to improve or increase his possessions for fear that they will be taken from him, and another does not hesitate to begin to trade for fear of the taxes that will be levied” (S&P, 79).

A prince must avoid hatred and contempt. To avoid being hated by the generality of men, he should keep taxes low, as was noted above. But he can only do this if he refrains from lavish spending. Just as important as not being hated is not being despised. “What makes him contemptible is to be held variable, light, effeminate, pusillanimous, irresolute, from which a

prince should guard himself as from a shoal” (Mansfield, 72). Poverty, too, renders a prince contemptible, which is another reason for practicing parsimony. So does being unarmed, “[f]or there is no proportion between one who is armed and one who is unarmed, and it is not reasonable that whoever is armed obey willingly whoever is unarmed, and that someone unarmed be secure among armed servants” (Mansfield, 58).

Regarding his ministers, a prince must select them carefully because “the first conjecture that is to be made of the brain of a lord is to see the men he has around him” (Mansfield, 92). If they are capable and loyal, the prince will be praised for his wisdom, but if they are not, he will not be respected. Also, even as he shuns flatterers, a prince must lay down conditions under which certain people can speak truth to him. For if everyone can do so, he becomes contemptible. Instead, a prudent prince must pick wise counselors,

and only to these should he give freedom to speak the truth to him, and of those things only that he asks about and nothing else. But he should ask them about everything and listen to their opinions; then he should decide by himself, in his own mode; and with these councils and with each member of them he should behave in such a mode that everyone knows that the more freely he speaks, the more he will be accepted. Aside from these, he should not want to hear anyone; he should move directly to the thing that was decided and be obstinate in his decisions (Mansfield, 94).

To be esteemed, it is important that a prince emerge triumphant from trials or from a struggle with great enemies:

Without doubt princes become great when they overcome difficulties made for them and opposition made to them. So fortune, especially when she wants to make a new prince great—since he has a greater necessity to acquire reputation than a hereditary prince—makes enemies arise for him and makes them undertake enterprises against him, so that he has cause to overcome them and to climb higher on the ladder that his enemies have brought for him. Therefore many judge that a wise prince, when he has the opportunity for it, should astutely nourish some en-

mity so that when he has crushed it, his greatness emerges the more from it (Mansfield, 85).

Also, in the area of interstate relations, a prince should act like “a true friend and a true enemy,” committing himself “without any hesitation ... in support of someone against another” (Mansfield, 89).

In acquiring esteem, appearances are as important as deeds, if not more so. Thus, any prince:

should be very careful that ... to those who see and hear him, he should seem to be exceptionally merciful, trustworthy, upright, humane and devout. And it is most necessary of all to seem devout. In these matters, most men judge more by their eyes than by their hands. For everyone is capable of seeing you, but few can touch you. Everyone can see what you appear to be, whereas few have direct experience of what you really are; and those few will not dare to challenge the popular view, sustained as it is by the majesty of the ruler’s position (S&P, 62-63).

“Above all, a ruler must contrive to achieve through all his actions the reputation of being a great man of outstanding intelligence” (S&P, 77).

### **FIDEL CASTRO: A MACHIAVELLIAN SKETCH**

In keeping with Machiavelli’s observation about the undistinguished origins of most men who have accomplished great things, Fidel Castro’s antecedents are, if not humble, certainly obscure and, at least by the standards of the times when he was growing up, shameful. His father, Angel Castro, hailed from a poor family in a remote village in Galicia, Spain. Having enlisted in the Army, in 1898 he was shipped to Cuba, then a Spanish colony, to do battle against the insurgents. After Cuban independence was secured, Angel remained behind, settling in Oriente province, the least civilized part of the Island. Starting as a day laborer for the United Fruit Company, by dint of hard work, shrewd investments, and harsh management (he packed a revolver when in the field supervising his workers, most of them black), Angel made himself a rich man without, however, shedding his rustic ways. Married to a schoolteacher who bore him several children, Angel subsequently took as mistress one of the servant girls, Lina Ruz (whom he

married after the first wife died). Fidel Castro was the third child born out of that illegitimate union.

From an early age Castro gave evidence of exceptional *virtú*, and not a little *prudenzia*, exhibiting such qualities as audacity, spiritedness, tireless energy, and single-minded determination to impose his will on others, as well as shrewdness in recognizing opportunities and astuteness in manipulating people. Even as a child he acted with surprising temerity. At boarding school in Santiago de Cuba, Oriente's largest city, he quarreled with classmates and defied teachers. Apprised that Fidel and his two brothers were the school's biggest bullies, Angel brought them home. But Fidel was sent back when he threatened to burn down his parents' house unless they did so.

At Belén High School in Havana (where he moved with one of his sisters to live), Castro hungered for recognition. An indifferent scholar, he sought leadership in sports. He tried out for the basketball team but was turned down. Refusing to give up, for a whole year he practiced daily into the night, becoming so proficient that he not only made the team but was chosen as its head. At the university, where politics, not sports, was the path to recognition, he "leaped precipitately" into the arena but "was defeated in his initial attempt and was never able to win an important office" (Quirk, 22). An alternative avenue was political gangsterism, and Castro joined one of the action groups, "little more than coterie of 'gangsters' with no detectable ideology" employing "terrorist methods against their enemies on and off the campus" (Quirk, 23, 22). In time, Castro acquired his own small following of hangers-on. He carried a pistol, and twice was suspected of murdering members of a rival faction, but the cases were not pursued, supposedly for lack of evidence.

Graduating with a law degree, Castro threw himself into politics as a member of the reformist Ortodoxo Party, the leadership of which, however, would not accept him. Undeterred, in 1951-52 he campaigned tirelessly for the party's nomination for one of the congressional seats from Havana province, writing

thousands of letters and making countless speeches seeking voter support. When the Ortodoxo Party's leader, Eduardo Chibás, died of a self-inflicted wound, Castro unsuccessfully tried to convince José Pardo Llada, a leading light of the party who was in charge of the funeral, to exploit the outpouring of public grief in order to seize power by diverting the procession from the cemetery to the presidential palace and storming the building, whereupon Pardo Llada was to proclaim himself president and appoint Castro chief of the military.

In March 1952, only a few months before the scheduled elections, former dictator-president turned presidential candidate Fulgencio Batista, seeing his comeback bid going nowhere, staged a bloodless *coup d'état*. Fidel Castro reacted almost immediately, publicly calling on the people to fight and filing suit against the usurper, demanding that he be tried and sentenced to a hundred years in prison. The following year he staged an attack on the *Moncada* Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, in which dozens of his followers died in battle or were summarily executed after capture. This was a macabre baptism in blood for the 26<sup>th</sup> of July organization, which Castro would name after the day of what turned out to be a massacre for many of his men. Taken prisoner and put on trial, he acted as his own defense counsel, using the occasion to launch a verbal attack against the dictatorship. Found guilty and sentenced to 15 years behind bars, at the Isle of Pines prison Castro organized his fellow *Moncada* inmates into study groups, reserving for himself the task of political education.

In 1955, Batista, newly inaugurated for a four-year term after holding an election the outcome of which was never in doubt, amnestied the *Moncada* prisoners. Upon release, Castro resumed his public campaign against the dictator, characterizing him as "conceited, vain, dishonest, and corrupt," and his language as "coarse, minacious, and vulgar" (Quirk, 85).<sup>6</sup> But as the government, in retaliation, tightened the screws of censorship, and the Ortodoxo Party leaders continued to keep him at arm's length, Cas-

---

6. Ironically, these terms apply to Castro just as well.

tro left for Mexico. There he recruited men, raised money (making two trips to the U.S. for the purpose), purchased weapons, and was briefly jailed when these were discovered. Late the following year, he sailed for Cuba, squeezing 82 men and materiel aboard the *Granma*, a yacht designed to carry only twelve. The landing in Oriente, his home province, was a failure (most of the men were captured or killed and a few escaped, and almost all the weapons and equipment were lost), but Castro and a remnant of fewer than two dozen followers made their way to the rugged mountains of the *Sierra Maestra*, at the easternmost tip of the Island, from where he carried on the campaign against Batista.

The better part of the next two years were spent mostly in recruiting and training guerrillas, raising money, acquiring weapons, struggling to keep control of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July underground, resisting proposals to enter into unity pacts or coalitions of anti-Batista groups, condemning conspiracies to stage a pre-emptive *coup* against Batista that would bring to office a provisional government outside his control, staging hit and run attacks on small military outposts, and waging an international propaganda campaign that widely exaggerated the size of his forces and the scale of government attacks against him, all the while projecting a message of moderation and benevolence. The propaganda war began with an interview with *New York Times* reporter Herbert Matthews, who was taken in by Castro's ruses and assurances. Matthews' articles turned Castro into an international sensation, and many other journalists from around the world sought to visit him in the *Sierra*.

When the dictatorship collapsed following Batista's New Year Eve's flight in January 1959, Fidel Castro became the man of the hour, lionized by vast multitudes during his week-long trek to and upon arrival in Havana. Denying that he had any political ambitions, while still in the *Sierra* Castro had hand-picked Manuel Urrutia, an obscure but honest judge, as provisional president. Now Urrutia reciprocated by naming him commander in chief of the Cuban armed forces, formalizing what was already *de facto*. Like Hiero of Syracuse, Castro quickly dissolved the

old army, executing many of its officers and men, and replaced it with a new one loyal to himself. Within a year Castro had discarded the provisional president and cabinet, brought the communists aboard his regime, purged his own organization of anti-communists and democrats, and began to revolutionize the entire Island in his own image, ruthlessly repressing all dissent. Henceforth, even as with almost every passing year his subjects had less to eat, endured greater hardships, and enjoyed fewer amenities, Castro continued to accumulate power and the titles to adorn it like no man in Cuba's history, and none but a handful, if that, in Latin America, had ever done.

Also like Hiero, Castro dumped the country's former allies in favor of new ones. Almost from the beginning he engaged the United States in a war of words. In 1961, he defeated a U.S.-sponsored landing of Cuban exiles, boasting he had scored a great victory against "imperialism." Audaciously thrusting Cuba into the thick of the Cold War, he embraced the Soviet Union and declared his undying allegiance to Marxism-Leninism. Next year, during the October Missile Crisis, he tried, in Khrushchev's own words, "to lasso" the Kremlin into "a war with America," even advising them "to use nuclear weapons" (Fursenko and Naftali 1997, 307, 314). When Khrushchev made a pact with Kennedy to withdraw the missiles without consulting him, Castro flew into a rage, refusing to allow international inspection of the missile sites. In order to mollify him, Moscow gave him the red carpet treatment during a month-long visit to the USSR, coddling and showering him with honors and encomiums.

Three decades and many vicissitudes later, Castro publicly warned that Gorbachev's initiatives of *glasnost* and *perestroika* were dangerous and violated socialist principles. In the face of a new rapprochement between Moscow and Washington, he criticized the Kremlin's flagging commitment to proletarian internationalism. When the empire that Stalin built came apart at the seams, Fidel Castro survived. Now in his early seventies, he bids fair to break the world's record for the longest one-man dictatorship in modern history.

In the foregoing hasty survey of Castro's conquest and consolidation of power, in the course of which he emerged from provincial obscurity to become Cuba's lord and master and play a part in international power politics, his voice heard and his bearded visage recognized around the world, a feat unprecedented in the history of Latin America, one discerns many of the manifestations of *virtú* and *prudenzia* that Machiavelli admired: audacity if not temerity, a spirited constitution, great stamina, strength in the face of adversity, as well as sagacity in identifying dangers and exploiting opportunities to the full.

As well as being well endowed with *virtú* and *prudenzia*, Fidel Castro received many favors from *fortuna*. Living dangerously, more than once he escaped death through chance or the intervention of others. Suffice it to remember the *Moncada* attack. The mission was suicidal. Castro may very well have minimized the personal risk to himself, staying "well back" of the fray, not firing a shot, and withdrawing hastily from the scene (Quirk, 55). Nevertheless, his life was spared through the timely intervention of others. When a squad of soldiers, hunting for the remnant of the attacking group, came upon Castro "asleep on the floor of a peasant hut," the lieutenant in charge, knowing very well what his fellow soldiers back in the barracks would do to Castro if he fell into their hands, whispered to him not to reveal his name and over his protests ordered his men to take him not to the *Moncada* but to police headquarters, an action that saved Castro's life (Quirk, 55).

Like Machiavelli's would-be prince, Castro developed a passion for military matters early on, and never lost it. Since childhood, he has exhibited a fascination with weapons (from slingshots all the way to nuclear missiles) and war. "His life, as a child and as a revolutionary, was one long love affair with firearms" (Quirk, 10). During his first year in the *Sierra*, Castro

developed the life-style and tactics that were to mold his battle plans for the months to come. He and his men moved incessantly, to improve their stamina, he said, and to preserve security (Quirk, 128-129).

Also in keeping with Machiavelli, who says that a prince must supplement the study of war with that of the lives of men worthy of emulation, as early as grade school Castro was also interested in "accounts of wars and battles, and stories about Cuba's great men, revolutionaries such as José Martí, Antonio Maceo, and Calixto García" (Quirk, 13). While at university, he began to collect books on Benito Mussolini, accumulating twelve volumes of the Italian fascist's writings. In prison, he read a biography of Napoleon Bonaparte, identifying with the Corsican who made himself emperor of the French and admiring not only his military campaigns but his oratory. Also, he wrote effusively of Marx and Lenin to his mistress, noting "I laugh and enjoy myself when I read them. Both were implacable, and they put fear into the hearts of their enemies. Two genuine prototypes of the revolutionary!" (Quirk, 69).

As we have seen, a Machiavellian prince knows how to imitate the lion and the fox. Roaring ferociously has been one of Castro's specialties. While in prison, he threatened to kill his brother-in-law when it became public that the latter had arranged a sinecure at the Interior Ministry for Castro's wife, Mirta. Later, learning that Mirta had divorced him, in a letter to one of his sisters he warned: "One day I'll be out of here, and I'll get my son and my honor back, even if the earth is destroyed in the process" (Quirk, 79). In the *Sierra*, when a letter allegedly from his brother Raúl Castro to Ché Guevara commenting favorably on Stalin and communism fell into the hands of the government and was made public, Castro exploded. He "walked back and forth, 'like a caged lion.' He threatened to kill Raúl: 'I don't give a fuck if he is my brother, I'll shoot him!'" (Quirk, 162). After the rebel victory, when executions of members of the old regime drew protests from Mexico and the United States, Castro angrily rejected the criticisms, blurting out that if the U.S. were to dare to intervene in Cuba, "200,000 gringos would die" (Quirk, 224). This was less than two weeks after his triumphal entry into Havana, long before the Bay of Pigs, the Missile Crisis, and countless other smaller confrontations with the U.S. In the years to come, Castro's bellicose rhetoric, directed mostly at Washington and his own subjects, would escalate to apocalyptic proportions.

Like the fox, who “gets around men’s brains,” Castro employed deception to seize power and get rid of enemies and rivals. During the struggle against Batista, he tried to drive a wedge between the dictator and the armed forces, repeatedly affirming that his fight was against the dictator, not the soldiers. Shortly after the rebel victory, while still in Oriente, Castro expressed to *Moncada* commander José Rego Rubido the hope “that his men and the soldiers of Batista’s army could be comrades” (Quirk, 211). Also, in a meeting with Air Force pilots, he assured them they had nothing to fear from “revolutionary justice” (Bernal 1999, 392). But in a matter of days officers and men of the armed forces were being summarily shot and when, less than two months after the rebel victory, a revolutionary tribunal found forty-three members of the Air Force (including mechanics) not guilty of war crimes, Castro angrily ordered a new trial, at which the accused were duly found guilty and sentenced to long prison terms.

From the time Batista seized control of the government until he fled the country, in countless manifestos, speeches, and interviews with Cuban and foreign journalists, Castro repeatedly gave assurances that at the top of his agenda was the restoration of the 1940 Constitution. After his release from prison, he wrote that “There can be no other formula, no other national solution, than general elections, as soon as possible, and with complete guarantees for everyone” (Quirk, 84). Also, time and again Castro denied that he had ambition for office. In 1958, less than a year before seizing power, he wrote to the National Directorate of his 26<sup>th</sup> of July organization that:

I’m sick of having my motives misrepresented. I’m not meanly ambitious. I don’t believe I’m a caudillo, and I don’t want to be one. I’m neither irreplaceable nor infallible. I don’t give a shit for all the honors or the responsibilities. It disgusts me to see men running after those chimeras (Quirk, 162).

One of Manuel Urrutia’s first acts as provisional president was to restore the 1940 Constitution and schedule elections in 18 months. However, he did not stay around long enough to see them held. Initially, Castro feigned subordination to the civilian government: “No act of ours will ever interfere with

or detract one iota from the authority of the president. ... We have no ambitions” (Quirk, 222). Yet, as Quirk tells it: “Though Fidel Castro continued to reiterate his respect for elections and democratic institutions and his loyalty to Urrutia, with every press conference and in every public utterance his words sapped the authority of the president” (Quirk, 227). The provisional government was scarcely five weeks old when the Prime Minister, José Miró Cardona, resigned. “A spokesman at the presidential palace announced to a surprised Cuban people that Fidel Castro would take his place” (Quirk, 227).

Within five months, Urrutia, too, was gone. Castro discarded him in a deft maneuver that combined the fox and the lion in one virtuoso act. One day in July he stunned the country by pretending to resign his post and briefly going into hiding, during which time thousands of his supporters were mobilized to plead that he come back. Castro reappeared in front of television cameras to accuse President Urrutia of having charged the government of being communist, an attitude that “‘bordered on treason’ ... ‘I am not a communist,’ Castro said, ‘and neither is the revolutionary movement. But we do not have to say we are anticommunists, just to curry favor with foreign governments’” (Quirk, 251). While Castro was still speaking, a threatening crowd gathered in front of the presidential palace to demand Urrutia’s ouster. The hapless president escaped through a back door. Disguised as a milkman, he requested asylum in the Venezuelan embassy.

According to Machiavelli, a new prince often finds his most loyal followers not among his original supporters, but among those whom he had originally regarded with suspicion. Even before the rebel victory, Castro was already looking to shed the 26<sup>th</sup> of July organization, which he was finding difficult to control. Once in power, he cut it down to size, elevating, instead, the Moscow-line Popular Socialist Party (PSP), which after having kept to the sidelines for most of Batista’s dictatorship (it had served on his cabinet in an earlier government), sent one of its top cadres to the *Sierra* in 1958.<sup>7</sup> After the rebel victory, it was the PSP which put itself unconditionally under Castro’s command, facilitating his take-over of agri-

culture, labor unions, the press and cultural organizations, the university, and countless other institutions, and easing his turn toward the Soviet Union. In the next few years, purged of recalcitrants and malcontents, i.e., anyone who demurred from Castro's dictates, the two organizations were fused under him.

Machiavelli views "the great" as posing a bigger threat to the ambitions of the prince than the people. And, from very the beginning, Castro set out to mow down any and all of Cuba's "great" until no one was left standing that would not bow to him. The first of the "great" to go had to be the greatest of all, i.e., the United States, under whose economic and political shadow Cuba had acquired independence from Spain and relative prosperity. If he could "unmake" the *yanquis*, no one else would be able to stand in his way. It was a risky venture, but Castro had taken deadly gambles before, and he was willing to roll the dice again. In the process of unmaking the Americans in Cuba, he made another great, namely the Soviets. But Havana being so far from Moscow, whatever position it would attain in Cuba, whose value was primarily strategic, would depend on keeping Castro happy, supplying him with vast quantities of weapons (since childhood his favorite toys)<sup>8</sup> and catering to his Napoleonic ego. Thus, for the purpose of aggrandizing his personal power, Castro's decision to unmake the U.S. and make the USSR in Cuba makes perfect Machiavellian sense.

There was another Machiavellian reason for taking on the United States: it was a singular enemy, one much resented in intellectual circles in Latin America and around the world, and if Castro emerged victorious from the encounter, it would be to his everlasting glory. Recall that, according to Machiavelli, when *fortuna* wishes to make a new prince great, she finds formidable enemies for him to overcome so that their very opposition to him provides the ladder he climbs to a radiant reputation. A new prince with a gargan-

antuan appetite for glory, it was Castro's fortune to find in the United States a ready-made, worthy (if vacillating) enemy against which to prove his mettle. In the end, having been left stranded in an impoverished Island by the historical wave that swept communism out of Europe, the fact that he remains a thorn that the United States never managed to pull out of its side may turn out to be his only claim to fame.

Having destroyed Cuba's pre-revolutionary "great," and made and unmade new ones at will, did Castro follow Machiavelli's advice for winning the support and avoid incurring the hatred of the people? All they want, said Machiavelli, is to be left alone to prosper in peace. If the prince refrains from taking their property and encourages them to pursue productive occupations, if they do not hesitate to improve or increase their possessions for fear of confiscation or higher taxes, in short, as long as they find that under the rule of the prince their private affairs are thriving, they will be content.

Castro scorned this advice. From the moment he rode into the capital, he acted with complete disregard for the property of others. Having settled himself in a luxurious suite in the Havana Hilton, Castro would "eat what he wanted, whenever and wherever he wanted it, and not worry about paying for it. He never brought cash. Like a reigning monarch, he lived completely outside the money economy" (Quirk, 232). Beginning with the expropriation of the holdings of real or alleged *Batistianos*, then large landed estates, the sugar mills, American companies, then the houses of anyone who fled the country, and so on down the line, through the revolutionary offensives of the sixties, progressively more and more property, large and small, was confiscated, until practically the entire country came under the control of a panoply of agencies of the party-state, all subject to Castro's will.

---

7. Interestingly, it has recently come to light that Fidel Castro's brother Raúl, as well as Ché Guevara, were secret members of the PSP. See Fursenko and Naftali (1997).

8. For an inventory of the "huge amount of military technology" supplied to Castro by the Soviets (and China) by April 1961, see Fursenko and Naftali (1997, 99). But this was a down payment. A lot more was to come.

Neither did Castro practice thriftiness. On the contrary, he recklessly squandered vast resources on a series of projects lacking economic rationale, zigzagging from crash industrialization to attempting to harvest ten million tons of sugar, breeding a new hybrid of cattle, producing more milk than Holland, making better cheeses than France, and other fantasies. Practically every year since 1959, while Castro regaled his subjects with promises of great abundance in a future that never arrived, new restrictions were imposed on consumption, new sacrifices required, greater “discipline” demanded. Nor did he allow the people any quiet, or to live in peace. Hundreds of thousands of youths were sent to fight and many of them to die in far-away wars and other conflicts of his own choosing. To this day, periodically, Cubans wake up to a new crisis, or another paroxysm of cruelty, thousands of thugs mobilized to stamp out yet another internal enemy, “common scum,” “lumpen,” “bums, loafers, and parasites,” to be spat on, beaten, and dragged through the streets, their honor and dignity trampled underfoot (Quirk, 808).

In short, Castro did just the opposite of what Machiavelli advised a prince to do in order to avoid being hated. On the contrary, he has done many things which the Florentine thought incur hatred, not just among the “great,” as Castro himself expected,<sup>9</sup> but among the people at large: he does not respect their property or their honor, or allow them any peace and quiet. Neither has he ceased being cruel. Thus, a student of Machiavelli would have reason to suspect that Castro is hated by the majority of Cubans. This hypothesis, however, goes against much of the conventional wisdom in the press and in academia which, at least until recently, has regarded Castro as popular with the masses, even if he is hated in Miami. Be that as it may, whether Castro is loved or hated by the majority of Cubans is a question that

cannot be answered at this point because, on account of widespread fear of the regime, it would be nearly impossible to get honest answers from his subjects. However, Mussolini’s ignominious end at the end of a rope, his body mutilated; the sudden collapse of communism in Europe; and the (to many journalists and academics) surprising defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 Nicaraguan elections should give pause to those who believe too readily in the illusions of popularity which totalitarian regimes manage to project.

If whether Castro inspires love or hatred among his subjects is unsettled, there can be no doubt that he is feared. Beginning in 1959, with the wholesale execution of *Batistiano* soldiers and police, eventually thousands of people were sent to the *paredón*,<sup>10</sup> and tens of thousands to serve long prison terms under subhuman conditions for opposing the regime, or simply criticizing it. Merely laughing at someone’s satirical impersonation of the Maximum Leader risks a jail term. The Island is blanketed with informers, in the neighborhood, at work, and in the street. A political police trained in the techniques of the KGB can pick up anyone, at any time, for any reason, hold him incommunicado, and interrogate him at will until he signs a suitable confession. There is no independent judicial authority that will issue writs of *habeas corpus* on behalf of political prisoners, or defense counsel that can do anything beyond pleading for clemency from the court, the guilt of the accused being a given. Reporting news of natural or man-made disasters or the outbreak of an epidemic, let alone of the corruption that pervades the regime, or giving that information to the foreign press, is a punishable offense. A politically incorrect remark can get one fired, and since there are few sources of employment other than the party-state, especially for professionals, dissimulation is the order of the day.

---

9. From the Isle of Pines prison, he wrote to his mistress that “I would sincerely love to revolutionize this country from one end to the other! I feel certain that this would bring happiness to the Cuban people. I would not be stopped by the hatred and ill will of a few thousand people, including some of my own relations, half the people I know, two-thirds of my legal comrades, and four-fifths of my former schoolmates!” (Quirk, 66).

10. *Paredón* (“to the wall”) means execution by firing squad. Franqui (1988, 350) estimates that there were 10,000 executions in the first 30 years of the regime, or an average of almost one per day.

Nor does anyone dare display contempt for Castro, in the sense of treating him with disrespect or disdain. To avoid being despised, Machiavelli advised, a prince must be well armed, something Castro has always taken care to do. To this day he packs a pistol and is protected by a phalanx of security guards armed to the teeth. Machiavelli also warned against “being considered inconstant, frivolous, effeminate, pusillanimous and irresolute” (S&P, 64) adjectives that, to the best of my knowledge, nobody has used in describing Castro.

In addition, Machiavelli counseled the prince to avoid becoming impoverished, which would cause him to be held in little regard. This was another reason, apart from avoiding hatred bred of the necessity for higher taxes, for being cautious about spending money. In the case of Castro, though, we have noted that he has been ever the spendthrift, and that Cuba’s economic conditions have deteriorated under his rule. A question that comes to mind, though, is whether *he himself* is poor. At home he enjoys countless privileges and *Forbes* magazine ranks him as one of the richest rulers in the world.<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, then perhaps he need not fear being despised on that account, although it is probably true that the condition of his country will, to some extent, reflect on the reputation of the prince: other things equal, one would expect the rich ruler of a rich country to command more respect than the rich ruler of a poor country.

There is one maxim for avoiding contempt, having to do with the quality of ministers, that Castro has never minded. *Contra* Machiavelli, Castro’s pattern has been to pick ministers primarily for their loyalty, even if they are not all that competent, to presume he knows more about everything that authorities in their respective fields, to disregard the advice of experts or to get angry with them when they contradict him, and obstinately to plunge into a project or campaign which specialists warn him has no chance of

success. Then, when the undertaking fails, he finds scapegoats among those who were put in charge of its implementation. Such behavior does not breed respect.<sup>12</sup> But it may be that as long as people fear Castro, they will swallow their contempt. This suggests that not all sources of contempt are equally dangerous for a prince.

Another way suggested by Machiavelli to gain esteem is for the prince to give the appearance of being “merciful, trustworthy, upright, humane, and devout,” especially the latter (S&P, 62). When he arrived in Havana, Castro wore a medallion of Cuba’s patroness, the *Virgen del Cobre*. To this day, when circumstances call for it, Castro occasionally puts on a mask of benevolence and humanity, particularly with foreign visitors, especially women reporters, with whom he can be quite affable, charming, and even candid. Intermittently, in a show of magnanimity, he releases and sends out of the country (he never allows them to stay behind) a handful of prisoners whose plight has come to the attention of some foreign dignitary. In speeches and in press interviews, Castro frequently expresses heated indignation at what he says are the lies, injustices, mean ambitions, and other dishonorable acts on the part of others, all the while protesting his own truthfulness and generosity. And he never ceases to speak pious words on behalf of the world’s poor, proclaiming to be their champion.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION: WHAT KIND OF ‘PRINCE’ IS FIDEL CASTRO?

Table 1 compares the Machiavellian prince and Fidel Castro on twenty-one items discussed in the previous sections. Note that on 19 of 23 characteristic qualities or behaviors, Castro fits the Machiavellian mold. Two items are in doubt: whether he is loved by his subjects and whether he avoided contempt by not falling into poverty. Also, there are two unambiguous discrepancies: against Machiavelli’s advice, Castro

11. On the many privileges enjoyed by Castro and his ruling clique, see Clark (1999). The *Forbes* estimate is available at <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/98/0706/6201240tab1.htm>.

12. For an illustration, see the case of the British geneticists Thomas Preston and Malcolm Willis (Quirk, 626-627).

**Table 1. Machiavelli’s Prince and Fidel Castro Compared**

Machiavelli’s Prince	Fidel Castro
Humble or obscure origins	Yes
Characterized by <i>virtù</i> : audacity, courage, energy, spiritedness, strength	Yes
Characterized by <i>prudenzia</i> : astuteness, cleverness, sagacity, shrewdness	Yes
Favored by <i>fortuna</i> : luck, intervention by others, opportunities	Yes
Studies history, modeled himself after great men	Yes
Relies on own resources, especially military	Yes
Engages in military exercises, acquires practical knowledge of terrain	Yes
Imitates the lion: roars ferociously to scare his enemies	Yes
Imitates the fox: “works around men’s brains” to deceive them	Yes
Dissolved old army and built a new one loyal to himself	Yes
Exchanged country’s old allies in favor of new ones	Yes
Declared himself for one of two states in conflict, did not stay neutral	Yes
Discarded many of those who supported his seizure of the state	Yes
Found reliable servants among those he had initially viewed with suspicion	Yes
Did not rely on the “great” for support; made and unmade the “great”	Yes
Acquired esteem by nurturing an enmity, defeating a great enemy	Yes
Projects appearance of humanity, benevolence, piety	Yes
Avoids contempt by being well armed	Yes
Instills fear in subjects	Yes
Is loved by subjects	?
Avoids contempt by not falling into poverty	?
Avoids contempt by appointing competent ministers and avoiding flatterers	No
Avoids hatred by keeping taxes low and respecting property of subjects	No

did not seek to avoid hatred<sup>13</sup> by being thrifty and respecting the property and honor of his subjects; nor did he avoid contempt by appointing competent ministers and shun flatterers.

Taking up the items on contempt first, note that Machiavelli offered yet a third way for avoiding being despised, namely to be well armed. That Castro is. Since there is little evidence that he is held in contempt by the generality of men, least of all by his subjects, it would appear that being armed, ferocious, and cruel (and Fidel Castro is all three), he will be feared. And this will offset any contempt derivative from his country being poor, the incompetence of his ministers, the flatterers and sycophants that serve him, and the wrongheadedness of his policies.

The other two items are not to be disposed of so swiftly, however. Rather, they raise theoretical and interpretive issues that are central to the question that serves as the title of this paper, i.e., is Castro a Machiavellian prince? It is true that Machiavelli did

not think that being loved was all that important to a prince. But if love is not important, avoiding hatred is, otherwise the prince can never be secure of his position, his subjects always remaining alert for an opportunity to get rid of him, and the prince constantly “afraid of everything and everyone” (S&P, 66). Now, these two passions being the reverse of one another, the subjects cannot both love and hate the prince. If the Cubans love Castro, they do not hate him, and vice versa. If they love him, then *contra* Machiavelli, a prince can confiscate property wholesale, render everyone insecure in his possessions, make it impossible for most people to accumulate wealth and enjoy luxuries or amenities even as he squanders resources on irrational projects and distant wars, never deliver on promises of plenty, but repeatedly demand more sacrifices, constantly disturb their lives, giving them no peace—and still they will not hate but love him.

On the other hand, suppose that, *contra* the conventional wisdom, Cubans do not love but actually hate Castro, as Machiavelli would have one expect, only

13. In fact, Castro seems to thrive on hatred, hating and inciting the people to hate a multitude of enemies, suitably dehumanized for the purpose.

their hatred is well hidden, dissimulated for fear of punishment. Then this means that Machiavelli was wrong in believing that, along with contempt, hatred was dangerous to a prince, that he underestimated how much fear a prince can inspire in his subjects, so much fear that he can be widely hated and not lose his state.

Or does it? There is another possibility: that despite their many similarities, Machiavelli's prince is fundamentally different from the kind of "prince" Castro is. Nowhere in *The Prince* does Machiavelli use the word tyrant or tyranny. The closest he comes to it is in the last two paragraphs of Chapter IX, where he briefly discusses the "absolute regime" (S&P, 37). There he says that such a regime is very difficult to establish, and that any prince that wishes to do so must keep the people dependent on him. By contrast, the *Discourses*, which is about republics, contains more references to tyrant and tyranny than to princes or principalities (see the Glossary in Mansfield & Tarcov 1996, 338, 344—henceforth M&T). There Machiavelli says that a new prince who wants to found a tyrannical regime must "make everything in that state anew," i.e., he has "to make in cities new governments with new names, new authorities, new men; to make the rich poor, the poor rich ... ; besides this, to build new cities, to take down those built, to exchange the inhabitants from one place to another; and, in sum, not to leave anything untouched in that province, so that there is no rank, no order, no state, no wealth there that he who holds it does not know it

as from [the prince]." Machiavelli goes on to opine that "these modes are very cruel, and enemies to every way of life, not only Christian, but human; and any man whatever should flee them and wish to live in private rather than as king with so much ruin to men" (M&T, 61-62).

But didn't Castro turn Cuba's social and economic hierarchy upside down, making the rich poor and at least a few of the poor relatively "rich"? Didn't he shift people about, establish new ruling structures, break up and rename old provinces and create new ones? If he did not literally "take down" Havana, didn't he ruin it simply by not keeping it up and failing to make new investments in infrastructure, letting large sections of it deteriorate, go to pieces and waste away?<sup>14</sup> Didn't he leave nothing intact in Cuba's society, economy, and state, allowing no rank, institution, or wealth to emerge that is not recognized as being granted as a privilege, and subject to recall at any time by him? Didn't he, in fact, set out to do just that, as he revealed in the letter he wrote from prison to his mistress, where confessed that he "would sincerely love to revolutionize this country from one end to another!"? (Quirk, 66).

I conclude, then, that Castro, although matching the Machiavellian prince in most respects, is fundamentally different from him. Machiavelli's prince is not a tyrant as the ancients understood the term. Fidel Castro is.

## REFERENCES

Bondanella, Peter and Mark Musa. 1979. *The Portable Machiavelli*. New York: Penguin.

Clark, Juan. 1999. "Igualdad y Privilegio en la Revolución de Castro." In Efrén Córdova, Ed., *40 Años de Revolución: El Legado de Castro*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 219-252.

---

14. In a recent telephone interview with a reporter, the renowned writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante laments that "Of Havana nothing is left even in Havana, it is destroyed, as if it had been bombed from within, of the buildings all that is left are the shells, the facades, behind which there is nothing. It is a painful disaster for me, but Havana has been totally destroyed by Fidel Castro" (Laguna 1999, 11A—my translation).

- De Grazia, Sebastian. 1989. *Machiavelli in Hell*. Princeton University Press.
- Franqui, Carlos. 1981. *Retrato de Familia con Fidel*. Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, S.A.
- Fursenko, Aleksandr and Timothy Naftali. 1997. *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*. New York: Norton.
- Geyer, Georgie Ann. 1991. *Revolutionary Prince: The Untold Story of Fidel Castro*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Laguna, Isabel. 1999. "Las Ciudades Añoradas de Cabrera Infante." *El Nuevo Herald* (August 2), 11A.
- Mansfield, Harvey C. and Nathan Tarcov. 1996. *Niccolò Machiavelli: Discourses on Livy*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mansfield, Harvey C. 1998. *Niccolò Machiavelli: The Prince*. Second Edition. University of Chicago Press.
- Pardo Llada, José. 1989. Fidel y el "Ché." Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, S.A.
- Quirk, Robert E. 1993. *Fidel Castro*. New York: Norton.
- Rasco, José Ignacio. 1999. "Semblanza de Fidel Castro." In Efrén Córdova, Ed., *40 Años de Revolución: El Legado de Castro*. Miami: Ediciones Universal, 411-444.
- Skinner, Quentin and Russell Price. 1988. *Machiavelli: The Prince*. Cambridge University Press.