



The Truth and Politics

After the second presidential “town hall” debate, more than one Republican commentator was upset with Mitt Romney for not having put the lie to the misconceptions embodied in some of the questions with which he and his opponent had to reckon.

There was one fiction in particular that garnered its share of attention. It pertained to the issue of gender inequality.

A young woman in the audience, exasperated by the idea that women get paid only 72 cents for every dollar paid to men, asked the incumbent and the challenger to account for how they planned on closing this “gender gap” in pay.

Now, Romney could have noted that this woman may as well be upset over witches and ghosts. He could have invoked plain old common sense by noting that if it was really true that employers could get this large of a discount on their labor force by simply hiring females, then men would be chronically unemployed. He could have observed that not only is it not a fact that women are underpaid, but that, if nothing else, decades of gender-based discrimination in favor of women has guaranteed them decisive workplace advantages over men.

In other words, Romney could have established, with the greatest of ease, that there is no gender gap. But the Republican nominee didn’t do any of this. Instead, he played along, and proceeded to pander to female voters with a gusto that may very well have made even his rival, the Panderer-in-Chief, blush. Romney did not tell the truth. Neither, I am sure, did Obama speak honestly on this issue. And what is true of this issue is no less true for a number of issues to which neither Democrat nor Republican is willing to speak candidly.

Yet is there anything objectionable about this?

The famed Renaissance thinker, Nicolo Machiavelli, certainly didn’t think so.

Machiavelli’s writings were intended to serve as a sort of instructional manual for rulers and aspiring rulers. Among the first things upon which he insists is that “how we live is so far removed from how we





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ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather learn to bring about his own ruin than his preservation.” Machiavelli ridicules those who “have imagined republics and principalities which have never been seen or known to exist in reality.”

The successful politician is he who deals with reality as it is — not as he would prefer it to be.

Machiavelli’s reality is no different from our reality: This is the reality with which we must deal. That is, although we no longer refer to our “elected representatives” as rulers — we call them “leaders” — the fact of the matter remains that their quest for “dominion” is qualified by the same kinds of considerations with which the princes of five centuries ago were preoccupied.

What are these considerations?

First, the masses — we would call them “the people” — believe that “all the qualities that are reputed good” should be possessed by office holders.

Machiavelli remarks that, “human conditions not permitting of it,” this is simply not possible. Nor, importantly, is it desirable.

Even if it was possible for a prince to possess those traits that are thought to be character excellences, Machiavelli says that “to possess them and always to observe them is dangerous,” for if observed, they promise to “lead to one’s ruin.” On the other hand, it is “useful” for a ruler or aspiring ruler to appear to possess them. He should “seem” to be “merciful, faithful, humane, sincere,” and “religious.”

Machiavelli states that “it is well” for a ruler to have these qualities and, more significantly, to seem to have them. Yet he is also quick to remind such a ruler that “you must have the mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise you may be able to change to the opposite qualities.” Rulers, especially new rulers, must recognize that they “cannot observe all those things which are considered good in men,” for they will be “often obliged, in order to maintain the state, to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion.”

Thus, a ruler “must have a mind disposed to adapt itself according to the wind, and as the variations of fortune dictate.” He must “not deviate from what is good, if possible, but be able to do evil if constrained.”

The most successful ruler is he who knows how to be like both “the lion” and “the fox.” Being powerful, the lion knows how to ward off wolves. But he does not know how to escape traps. The fox, in contrast, is powerless against the force of a wolf, even though he most certainly is adept at evading traps.

While the best ruler is both fox and lion, “it is necessary” that he “be able to disguise this character well, and to be a great feigner and dissembler.” Since “men are so simple and so ready to obey present necessities,” he “who deceives will always find those who allow themselves to be deceived.”

This last point is especially telling, for what it demonstrates is that the situation of the ruler hasn’t changed in the least from Machiavelli’s day to our own precisely because we — the populace — haven’t changed.

Granted, we live under a representative theory of government — “Democracy!” — under which we “choose” our rulers (our “leaders”). Yet as theorists from Gaetano Mosca to Joseph Schumpeter long ago observed, the citizenry in such a system is no more immune to the manipulative machinations of rulers and aspiring rulers than were the masses under kingship (or any other constitutional arrangements).



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Actually, the citizens of a democracy are much more susceptible to being manipulated precisely because they are democrats. Those who would rule need the votes of those over whom they wish to preside.

As Schumpeter said, the voter's will, far from being "determinate" and "rational," is actually "an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions" thrust upon him by "pressure groups and propaganda." For the average voter, "mere assertion, often repeated" is much weightier than "rational argument" could ever hope to be.

"The will" of "the people" that politicians claim to champion is an "artifact." Along with the issues themselves, it is "manufactured" similarly to the ways in which the desires and wants of consumers are manufactured by "commercial advertising." As Schumpeter explains, in politics:

We find the same attempts to contact the subconscious. We find the same technique of creating favorable and unfavorable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are. We find the same evasions and reticences [sic] and the same trick of producing opinion by reiterated assertion that is successful precisely to the extent to which it avoids rational argument and the danger of awakening the critical faculties of the people.

Upon reading the great political theorists of the past, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the more things change, the more they stay the same.



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