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Montesquieu and the Enlightenment, anyone? Or do we prefer the darker amoral Machiavelli?

By Chris Chatteris SJ

Now and then, a remark on a commentary thread can stop one in one's mental tracks. A recent comment was the observation, I suspect from an American, that few people these days read Montesquieu, whereas it's hard to get through college without reading Machiavelli.

I conducted informal research on this among my Jesuit confreres. I found that this small sample supported the contention. I was almost the only group member who could say who the Baron de Montesquieu was and what his main ideas were. That was only because I was made to write an essay on him while studying French literature in the seventies!

On the other hand, all my brethren knew exactly who Machiavelli was. All knew about his cynical and pragmatic political philosophy of brutal expediency. Some had read his famous work, *The Prince*, written to butter up Lorenzo de' Medici out of whose favour he had recently fallen.

Why is this important? Because if popular literature shapes our ideas and if Machiavelli is one of the political works being widely read, at least in the Anglosphere, then frankly, maybe it's not so surprising that there are Trumps and Johnsons about. I am assuming, incidentally, that the ignorance of Montesquieu is not so pervasive in his native France!

And why are we missing out by not reading Montesquieu? Because it is upon his ideas that today's democracies are founded. He was keen on the idea of freedom within the law. Most notably, (in debate with John Locke) he developed the fundamental concept of the separation of powers, an arrangement so taken for granted in modern democratic dispensations that we only seem to notice it when it is in danger. But when you look at the way, for example, that Trump stacked the US Supreme Court with congenial judges, or how he attempted to overturn the presidential elections or how Orban of Hungary has hobbled the other arms of government, you see the threat to that essential separation and how vitally important it is. But do we care?

However, let's face it honestly – dry, legal stuff like the separation of powers is boring compared to the racy, red-blooded, end-justifies-the-means scribblings of Machiavelli. He gives us frissons of the nasty and brutal Italian power politics of his day. Think of Guiliiano de' Medici, Lorenzo's brother, being bumped off during Mass in the cathedral in Florence. (He was stabbed nineteen times; Lorenzo himself was wounded in the same attack.)

The problem is that out there in the real world of today, there is an existential intellectual and geopolitical struggle between what Montesquieu and Machiavelli represent. It seems to me to be necessary to acknowledge this, understand the issues and act to renew our perhaps somewhat jaded democratic political convictions. It might soon be too late if we get distracted by flirtations with Machiavelli's entertaining but ultimately dangerous and morally bankrupt worldview.

Montesquieu stands for the Enlightenment values that underpin most democracies in the world. Sure, these values are Western because a Frenchman first coherently proposed them. On the other hand, Machiavelli's thought (also a Westerner, by the way) sits very nicely, thank you, with the present and dangerous despots and political godfathers of our modern era, those who would drag us down into a politics of brute force, repressive terror and imperial revanchism.

We dabble in the latter writer and remain ignorant of the former at our peril.