
BOOK MARKS

Raymond A. Whiting
Department of Political Science
Augusta State University

Book Review

*The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli
and Montesquieu*

Maurice Joly, translated from the French and
with commentary by John S. Waggoner
2002, Lexington Books
\$29.95, paperback

Let me start by saying this work is not for the optimist, but if you are looking for an intellectually stimulating and thought provoking book, this is the ticket. The work weaves together the mindsets of Montesquieu and Machiavelli as they argue about the future of self-rule and republican government from their less than comfortable seats in Hell. As you work your way through the sheer volume of ideas contained in this work you are bound to experience a growing respect for the ideologies of Machiavelli. Not so much because you think he is right but because you will slowly began to realize the extent to which his thoughts have influenced the world today.

Before I go further it is also worth

noting the story behind the publication of this book in its current form. Originally published in France in 1864, as the *Dialogue aux Enfers entre Montesquieu and Machiavelli* (Dialogue in Hell between Montesquieu and Machiavelli) the work was written by Maurice Joly as a satire of the "Machiavellian" Regime of Napoleon III. The work was written as an imaginary dialogue between the 18th century French philosophical historian, Montesquieu who represented classical liberal ideology and the 15th/16th century Italian statesman, Machiavelli who represented cynical political expediency and sly despotism.

Despite, or perhaps because of the insightfulness of the book, its publication did not sit well with Louis Napoleon and the work had to be published first in Geneva in 1864, and later in Belgium. The work was confiscated as soon as it appeared in France. Eventually Joly was arrested and served fifteen months in prison for his thinly veiled criticisms of Louis Napoleon's reign. This turn of events began a succession of failures in Joly's life that eventually led to his suicide in 1879. Ironically Joly died without knowing that his book would go on to achieve a kind of perverse immortality.

After Joly's death his original work was revived and widely read, but in a monstrous new form. Although the original (and current) work had nothing to do with race or religion, it was altered and republished so it became an

instrument of prejudice and persecution. In this form the book was known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and it became one of the most inflammatory and diabolical forgeries in history. The work was used to propagate the belief that the Jews were plotting world domination, and thus the need to oppress them as a race. To achieve this goal, all of Joly's references to "France" were changed to "Zion" and all references to the "Emperor" became "We the Jews". As a result, Joly's original work that was intended to be a tool to oppose repressive government became an instrument of oppression itself.

Given such a history it is refreshing to see the current addition of Joly's work restored to its original purpose of warning all of us about the dangers that free government faces, not from foreign governments but from within. To a great extent, watching our current world events unfold is much like witnessing Machiavelli's *Dialogue* come to life. It is easy for the reader to draw parallels between our current world events and those who seem to side with Montesquieu's unfailing faith in justice and liberty or those voices who may seem to echo Machiavelli's argument for a restriction of traditional freedoms, all in the name of safeguarding those same values.

To a great extent, our current times are deeply concerned with the exact questions dealt with in this book "to what degree is it possible for the free world to engage in self-rule?" With

the destabilizations of repressive regimes from the Soviet empire to Afghanistan and Iraq, the world is faced with a growing number of attempts at the local, national and regional levels to institute new governmental forms based on self-governing political entities. At the same time we are witnessing continuing efforts to reconstitute the traditional governments of Europe into a new and more powerful supranational form. All this striving to create and recreate governments that are capable of self-rule is ultimately concerned with the same basic questions that are addressed in Joly's work: who should rule, who should be ruled, and how can we construct a government that will protect the freedom of its citizens rather than degenerate into despotism?

Joly's work helps us to remember that it is far easier to destroy a particular oppressive regime than it is to replace it with a governmental structure that won't simply repeat the crime of its predecessor. Joly's work helps us to remember that despite the gains we think we have made in the name of liberty and freedom we would be wise to remain skeptical and vigilant about the cost that those gains may exact against liberty itself.

In addition to Joly's original text, John Waggoner adds some excellent commentaries and insights that effectively places some of the more outdated points of the text back into a modern context. As a result, some may read this book as describing the essentials for a

program of Fascist or Communist take over, while others may read it as an outline for the agenda of the Liberal Secular Humanist state. Whichever interpretation you may naturally lean toward, I strongly recommend this book to anyone who is currently questioning the course of global events within the free world. It is a great refresher for anyone who is interested in reviewing the threats to liberty that can occur with a limited democratic republic or who may be interested in the demise of freedom through the back-door.

Biographical Sketch

Ray Whiting is a Professor of Political Science at Augusta State University. He holds a Juris Doctor and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Syracuse University. In 2002, he published his first book, "The Right to Die: Twenty-Three Centuries of Debate." You can contact Ray by email at rwhiting@aug.edu.