
Inferno

Maurice Joly

(John S. Waggoner, ed. and trans.)

**The Dialogue in Hell Between
Machiavelli and Montesquieu:
Humanitarian Despotism and the
Conditions of Modern Tyranny**

Lexington Books, 2002, 392 pages.

Reviewed by Daniel A. Doneson

Few books are more famous for what subsequent forgers do with them than for their original contents. Maurice Joly's *The Dialogue in Hell Between Machiavelli and*

Montesquieu, first published in Brussels in 1864, is indeed a very strange book. And its strangeness is multiple. The history of its genesis and multiple fates is bizarre—and its content no less so.

Who was Maurice Joly? By best guess he was born in Lons-le-Saunier, France in 1821 to a French father and an Italian mother. An unreformable truant, he successfully completed his legal studies and was finally admitted to the Paris bar in 1859.

In Joly's day, open criticism of the rule of Napoleon III was strictly forbidden; Joly's solution was to hide

behind his characters, to place his understanding of the motives, aims, and methods of the emperor in the mouth of the notorious Machiavelli in order to expose his tyranny. But he was too clever by half: *The Dialogue in Hell*, printed in Belgium and smuggled into France for distribution, was seized by the police immediately upon crossing the border. The police swiftly tracked down its author, and Joly was arrested; on April 25, 1865, he was sentenced to fifteen months' imprisonment. His *Dialogue* met a similar fate: Confiscated and banned, it was to remain unread for quite some time. Fortune did not smile upon Joly, whose life was a series of disappointments, ending in his suicide in 1879.

In his 1870 *Autobiography*, Joly relates how, one evening by the Seine, he was suddenly struck with the idea of writing a dialogue between Montesquieu and Machiavelli. The noble baron Montesquieu would make the case for liberalism; the Florentine wizard Machiavelli would present the case for cynical despotism. In this manner, Joly would communicate the secret ways in which liberalism may spawn a despot like Napoleon III.

It was the strange fate of Joly's *Dialogue in Hell*, however, to serve also as a basis of hell on earth. One of the few editions to survive the

confiscation of Napoleon III's secret police found its way to Switzerland, where it was picked up by the Russian secret police. Forgoing suppression, the Russians instead turned to forgery; they rewrote its twenty-five dialogues and interspersed them with plagiarized snippets of anti-Semitic drivel. The result was an instant classic: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a book that to this day competes with the Bible as the world's best-seller.

According to scholars, the *Protocols*, which ostensibly reveals the secret behind the Zionist Congress convened by Theodor Herzl in Basel, Switzerland in 1897, was hurriedly pieced together in Russia to exert pressure on Czar Nicholas II. Alfred Rosenberg brought the *Protocols* to Hitler in 1923. Hannah Arendt famously observed in her classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the *Protocols* was "a model for the future organization of the German masses for 'world empire.'" In her eyes, "the delusion of an already existing Jewish world domination formed the basis for the illusion of future German domination." Fate works in mysterious ways: Whenever the smoke cleared from the twentieth century's bloodiest and most cataclysmic events, this *ne plus ultra* of conspiratorial texts is somewhere, somehow at hand.

Nor did its pernicious influence end with the Third Reich. Egyptian state-run television recently aired a forty-one-part miniseries which dramatized the *Protocols*. In the new Alexandria library, there rests in a display case of the holy books of monotheistic, Abrahamic faiths a copy of the first Arabic translation of the *Protocols* along with several Tora scrolls. Yousef Ziedan explains his curating thus:

Although the [*Protocols*] is not a monotheistic holy book, it has become one of the sacred [texts] of the Jews, next to their first constitution, their religious law, [and] their way of life.

It is an irony worthy of such ironists as Machiavelli and Montesquieu that a brilliant, long-forgotten defense of liberalism was to serve as the foundation for an appalling, graceless tract whose popularity sees no signs of abating anytime soon.

While Napoleon III's police confiscated what were thought to be all extant copies of the *Dialogue*, another copy mysteriously resurfaced in Istanbul. In 1921 a correspondent for the London *Times* immediately made the connection with the *Protocols* upon reading Joly's work. The prestigious *Times* had already

previously published the *Protocols* in English translation and was deeply embroiled in a controversy over its authenticity.

The recovered text drew considerable interest from two of France's most illustrious political thinkers of the twentieth century: Raymond Aron and Jean-François Revel. *The Dialogue in Hell* was published by Aron in France in 1968 as an integral text. A famed member of the Académie Française, Revel wrote the introduction to the French version with the Fifth Republic in mind; he found Joly's "startlingly prophetic powers" ever illuminating in his descriptions of the modern media and its implications.

Yet despite its profound meditation on modern politics, and because of its notorious past, scholars have paid scant attention to Joly's work on its own terms. It has been translated into English only once. Herman Bernstein translated it in the context of his study of the *Protocols*, *The Truth About the Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Complete Exposure*. A measure of the weakness of that translation is that even the title of Joly's work is mistakenly rendered "Dialogues" and not the proper "Dialogue."

It is this gap that John S. Waggoner, a professor of political science

who has taught at the Sorbonne, the American University of Paris, and the American University of Cairo, aims to fill by giving English-language readers a complete translation at once accurate and nimble, together with an illuminating commentary. There he shows us why *The Dialogue in Hell* remains an indispensable guide to the vulnerabilities of modern politics to new forms of tyranny, the conditions of which Joly sensed in the project of Napoleon III.

In Joly's dialogue, Machiavelli, the proponent of tyranny, converses with Montesquieu, the advocate of liberal democracy. The subject of their debate is whether a constitutional republic, equipped with all the institutional bulwarks against tyranny that Montesquieu ingeniously describes in his *Spirit of the Laws*, can nonetheless give rise to tyranny.

A brief word about Machiavelli and Montesquieu. The Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) is virtually synonymous with the Italian Renaissance; a Columbus of the human spirit (in his own words) who claimed to discover a new moral continent. He claims to teach all he knows in his two most infamous books, *The Prince* and *The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, both published posthumously. He is the founder of modern political philosophy, intentionally effecting

a break with the whole tradition that preceded him. The substance of his political teaching is his wholly new teaching regarding the "wholly new prince"—that is, regarding the essential necessity of immorality in the foundation and structure of society. Machiavelli's principle in a sentence: One must lower moral standards in order to make probable, if not certain, the actualization of the right or desirable social order, or in order to conquer chance.

Montesquieu's (1689-1755) political intentions, like those of Hobbes and Locke before him, were to find those political institutions that ensure the security of persons and goods. Montesquieu's doctrine, however, unlike that of his liberal predecessors, was not founded on an analysis of man's original condition or an inquiry into the basis of political legitimacy. His doctrine, rather, depends upon the interpretation of political experience, the English experience to be exact. Montesquieu was uniquely situated between the active sovereignty of kings (ending with the English revolution), and the active sovereignty of the people (beginning with the French Revolution) when the question of legitimacy seemed less urgent. About his doctrine it has been remarked that by finding the heart of the political problem in the conflict between *power* and *liberty*,

Montesquieu determines the definitive language of liberalism.

It is these two thinkers, and what they represent, that Joly sends to hell to converse about the dark truths of modern politics. Machiavelli characteristically displays, Waggoner observes, “absolute control over the movement of the discussion.” As Waggoner ably demonstrates, Joly had a higher opinion of Machiavelli’s knowledge of politics than that of Montesquieu. Waggoner points out that Joly displays his discipleship to Machiavelli’s teaching even in the form of his dialogue, which, like *The Prince*, consists of twenty-five chapters with a discussion of conspiracies at its center.

Machiavelli effortlessly outmaneuvers Montesquieu, despite Montesquieu’s awareness of the Florentine’s penchant for cunning and deception. Machiavelli, however, knows to whom he speaks and appeals to Montesquieu’s native patriotism. In order to disarm the baron, he plainly disavows *The Prince* as a trite tract for the times, reflections simply on sixteenth-century Florence.

Despite his disavowal, Machiavelli returns repeatedly to *The Prince* and reiterates his teachings. In his words, “all men seek to dominate and no one would not be a tyrant if he could. All, or nearly all, are ready to sacrifice another’s rights to their own

interests.” Any political theory worth its salt must start from the hard truths: all men, or nearly so, are self-serving “ravenous beasts.” Hence the search for social stability can never forgo the need to use force; quixotic abstractions like justice and right merely disarm one and leave one at the mercy of the bad. In the famous words of *The Prince*, chapter 15, one must “learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity.” Machiavelli thereby puts the virtues of morality at a double remove: On the one hand, worry about reputation for the virtues, not the virtues themselves, and on the other hand, worry about whether they are politically useful or dangerous.

Montesquieu, for his part, admits that “force and cunning” are crucial in human affairs, but still he insists that men need principles that invoke “morality, justice, religion.” Montesquieu charges Machiavelli with undermining the very society whose stability he wishes to safeguard:

Stop deceiving yourself. Each act of usurpation by the prince in the public domain authorizes a similar infraction where the subject is concerned. Each act of violence in high places legitimizes one in low....

The subject of *The Prince* is the “wholly new prince,” a discoverer of a new type of social order. “A wholly

new prince in a wholly new state,” Machiavelli says, is a man who has not merely acquired an already existing state but has succeeded in founding a state; he is a radical innovator, the founder of a wholly new society, or even of a new religion. Machiavelli points to Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus as men “who have acquired or founded kingdom.” These men Machiavelli calls “prophets.” Machiavelli’s deepest intention in *The Prince* is “prophetic,” in his sense; he aims to set out a wholly new teaching, and thereby to inaugurate a new political project “for the common good of all.”

Joly’s Montesquieu replies that we no longer inhabit an epoch whose politics are moved by great founders. Politics and society have become more rational and stable; this is in no small measure due to his own contribution in the form of a new political science that stresses institutions, and not individuals, as the key to social stability. The administration of things has replaced the need for biblical piety, classical virtue, and Machiavellian *virtù*. This new political science will virtually ensure the demise of tyranny as a political possibility by remaining cognizant of the true dynamics of power, capable of regulating such power through separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, and by working in conjunction with a

free press, universities, and transparent financial institutions.

Machiavelli, for his part, seizes on Montesquieu’s historical optimism. Montesquieu has not taken into account subsequent events, most notably the “events of 1848,” by which Machiavelli no doubt means the *coup d’état* of Napoleon III. In effect, Machiavelli says: Your optimism is misplaced.

In the crucial moment, Machiavelli wagers that he can transform Montesquieu’s liberal republic, even with its “ideas, mores, laws... [and] all the institutions that guarantee liberty,” into a thriving tyranny.

For the remainder of the dialogue Machiavelli takes us step by step on the steady march of a potential tyrant showing us *ad oculus* how to subvert every one of liberalism’s institutional checks and witness the emergence of a tyrant with unparalleled authority. It was the genius of Joly to see with unrivaled clarity that the political and economic arrangements in nineteenth-century Europe did not amount to an inevitable march of progress and enlightenment, but rather contained the seeds of an even darker age: A new epoch of unprecedented tyranny. In the voice of Machiavelli, Joly identifies the greatest weaknesses and vulnerabilities of liberalism, and he finds them in the very institutions championed by his

Montesquieu as having eliminated tyranny altogether.

The separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers mandated by liberal constitutionalism can be undermined by means of a series of subtle reforms. The prince may press for constitutional changes to weaken the legislative branch and strengthen the more easily corrupted judiciary. Even if such innovations require a national plebiscite for legitimacy, the people might voluntarily agree to amend their own constitution.

As *The Prince* teaches, one must rely on one's own arms, and the modern arms *par excellence* are the press. Here is Joly's Machiavelli:

I dare say that, to this day, no government has conceived of anything as bold as what I am about to describe. Since it is almost always because of the press that governments in parliamentary countries are brought down, my scheme envisions neutralizing the press by the press itself. Because journalism wields such great power, do you know what my government will do? I will become like them. I will be journalism incarnate!

Machiavelli's revolutionary tyrant turns the press into his weapon by managing information, journalists, journals, and newspapers. He even manages the criticism of the regime so as to conform with the legitimacy of his rule.

But the critical question for Machiavelli remains: how does the prince pay for all of this? Joly's Montesquieu points out that modern princes must borrow money, and there are limits to what even a crooked accountant can do. Because a prince wishing to borrow money requires "a system of accountability and public access to information," it seems Montesquieu's new science of politics has tamed Machiavelli's prince. But in addition to employing the powers of the modern media mogul, Machiavelli's prince, like his latter-day progeny, the modern executive, masters too the *imperii arcana* of budgetary manipulation.

Joly characterizes the abuse of liberalism that Machiavelli counsels—the preservation of liberal forms and institutions as a mask to hide one's tyranny—as the decisively novel and modern element of this tyranny. Modern tyranny is supported by a political religion that appeals to the most profound longings of its citizens by demanding absolute obligation and promising the greatest reward: Salvation here on earth. In the words of Aron, modern tyranny belongs to the *religions seculaires*: The regime founded upon a religious passion and containing a religious element satisfies the people as it justifies absolute obedience to absolute authority. It is precisely this strange hybrid of

religious passion and political power that Waggoner identifies as “the common ideological trait of totalitarianism.”

Machiavelli wins the wager, not so much because he can demonstrate that tyranny can take root and flourish even within a liberal order, but rather because he shows that it is *especially* within the liberal order, and *without* separating morality from politics, as Montesquieu had declared. Just declare the prince a quasi-god, and his glory will be fused with morality, for he is at one with the justice prescribed by his law.

Like our contemporary soothsayers, believers in technological solutions to politics, Joly’s Montesquieu had been confident that the progress of liberalism was inevitable. But, Joly seems to say, his ignorance of Europe after 1848 is a fatal blindness. The arrest of Joly and the censorship of his *Dialogue* would seem to prove it. Napoleon III’s dictatorial *coup d’état* of 1851 was the beginning of a new form of tyranny that constituted the greatest threat to liberalism, consisting of a perverse, but all too easy, mixture of a despotic state with humanitarian social goals.

Joly’s *Dialogue* succeeds in showing how “the dreadful despotism taught by Machiavelli in *The*

Prince” could, “by artifice and evil ways,” impose itself on modern society. Moreover, he warns us that humanitarian means and aims may issue in murderous tyranny. We are shown that our belief in progress is little more than an unjustified faith; for progress in the arts and sciences does not constitute decisive progress in morals, politics, or wisdom. We are reminded that tyranny is a political possibility coeval with man.

Waggoner’s commentaries on this rediscovered classic take the reader on a whirlwind tour of many of the timeless issues of politics with the guidance of such masters as Machiavelli and Montesquieu. Yet Joly underestimates his heroes and their true philosophic and political radicalism.

The author of *The Prince* was more than an analyst of tyranny or partisan of republicanism. More importantly, the Montesquieu of Joly’s *Dialogue* is, as Waggoner points out, a distortion, “more the contemporary liberal, a man of good intentions but one who would be the dupe and casualty of Napoleon’s politics.” The real Montesquieu—moderate, sober, clear-sighted, infinitely subtle—is sacrificed in the pages of Joly.

Joly simply fails to see that Montesquieu was a disciple of Machiavelli. Machiavelli seeks to liberate acquisitiveness from any sacred

restraint, such as conscience, pangs of guilt, or fear of divine retribution. Montesquieu begins from the same premise but sees that it need not require the spilling of blood and may even effect the improvement of one and all. The solution to the political problem by economic means is, for Montesquieu, the most elegant solution starting from Machiavelli's premise. The modern system of trade and finance replaces stern and bloody republican virtue with the virtue Montesquieu calls *humanité*. Thus, to borrow a phrase, Montesquieu's economism is Machiavellianism come of age.

Yet, despite these limitations, Joly's *Dialogue* is second to none as an analysis of despotism rooted in ideology as it first reared its ugly head in the nineteenth century. Aron and Arendt were worthy heirs of his Machiavelli and Montesquieu. In scrutinizing the threat to liberal freedom from within liberalism itself and the path to new forms of despotism, Joly set out "the conditions of modern tyranny." In the regime of Napoleon III, we witness a new genus of despotism, "humanitarian despotism." Joly's powers of prediction were prophetic. The twentieth century made plain that the possibility of tyranny lies even within the soil seemingly least congenial to it.

The *Dialogue's* strange fate to the contrary, Joly was not an anti-Semite. In yet another irony, the only feature of modern totalitarianism he did not foresee seems to be this past century's predilection for murderous anti-Semitism. Still, Joly's portrait differs in important respects from National Socialism and Soviet Communism. For Joly's tyrant is at great pains to preserve the forms of liberalism so as to mask his tyranny.

Turning from Joly to his masters in hell, we wonder what these illustrious giants of thought would have said of our last century's bloody tyrannies. Would the philosopher Montesquieu still say, "in all the countries of the world, we love morality," and "men, rogues in retail, are on the whole very honest people; they love morality"?

While Machiavelli would have surely despised our twentieth-century tyrannies, would he have granted that his teaching calls forth a modern, bloodier version of the very "pious cruelty" that it was part of his ultimate intention to eliminate? The Christian concern with the salvation of man's immortal soul seemed to require actions that appear to Machiavelli "inhuman and cruel." Machiavelli condemns the "pious cruelty" and stupidity Ferdinand of Aragon demonstrated in expelling the gifted Jews and Marranos from Spain in

the Inquisition under the orders of the Church. Machiavelli is the only non-Jew of his age who expressed this view, and it is the only kind of cruelty he condemns, precisely because Ferdinand does not so much use religion as he is used by it.

Machiavelli understood such evils of religious persecution as a necessary consequence of the Christian principle: A considerable increase in man's inhumanity was the unintended consequence of man's aiming too high. Machiavelli's principle: One must lower the standards so as to avoid committing such bestialities which are not required to preserve society and freedom; let us replace the Christian virtue of charity by calculation in order to make probable, if not certain, the actualization of the right or desirable social order. Twentieth-century totalitarianism, however,

with its fantastic promises for the realization of universal principles, proved to exceed the "pious cruelty" of any sect with which Machiavelli was acquainted. Hitler and Stalin put Ferdinand and Isabella to shame.

In addition to teaching us about the permanence of the possibility of tyranny, and its perverse new forms in modernity, Joly compels us to wonder whether our liberalism or Machiavelli's teaching is truer. Machiavelli taught: To hell with morality, let us have a politics of security. We modern liberals, by contrast, want it both ways—to have a politics of security and also to be moralists. At least in that sense, Machiavelli and his beloved ancients were right: "The nature of the people never changes."

Daniel A. Doneson is the Literary Editor of AZURE.