

Some Learnings

By Luis Rubio, President, Centre of Research for Development (CIDAC), Mexico City
(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATAM*, December 20, 2015)

The first book I read on embarking upon the study of Political Science was *Introduction to Political Thought* by Umberto Cerroni, a small but substantial tome. There I came to know the first fruits of Machiavelli not only as the earliest articulator of formal political thought in the modern era, but also as something distinct from religious life. Machiavelli has always been interpreted as the conceptualizer of the *raison d'état*, disjoining ethics from the exercise of power. It is within this context that it was extraordinary to read the book by Philip Bobbitt, *The Garments of Court and Palace*, an analysis of Machiavelli that breaks with that tradition. For Bobbitt, Machiavelli was a great builder of the constitutional state because he severed the interest of the person who governs from that of the State; according to Bobbitt, Machiavelli's entire point was that the governor entertains distinct interests from those of the State and that the interests of the latter should prevail. Thus, despite that innumerable politicians retain Machiavelli as a guide for personal advancement, for Bobbitt, Machiavelli was not the thinker of dissolute power, but rather the great erector of the modern State, of the Republic. Fascinating reading.

In *The Dictator's Learning Curve*, William J. Dobson studies the changing world of dictators in the world throughout time. Dobson's main argument is that in the past authoritarian governments could be preserved to the degree that they achieved some sustainable sources of stability, such as economic growth; however, in recent decades, all that has changed because maintaining power has metamorphosed into immense intricacy given the appearance of instantaneous information as a reality that affects the exercise of power and fortifies the capacity of the society to defend itself against abuse. However, Dobson counters, while one would think that this would lead to the disappearance of dictatorships, what has really happened is that dictators have learned to adapt, taking advantage of the benefits of globalization and fine-tuning their strategies to keep their power intact. Therefore, although Stalin perpetuated a reign of terror that imperiled his population day and night, Putin conserves an authoritarian regimen but has no problem with Russian citizens traveling the world over. In the same manner, the old Chinese economic system that impoverished its people has been replaced by a modern industrial economy fully integrated into the international sphere, but that has not modified the Communist regime of yore. What's interesting about Dobson's discussion is that today two adaptation processes endure: that of the dictators and that of the societies, and his speculation is that it's not obvious which will win.

Michael Walzer is a specialist in political theory that became famous in the seventies because of his book on just and unjust wars. In that book he analyzed military operations through history from Athens to Vietnam, and established a set of ethical parameters for the conducting of wars. That book transformed the U.S. debate and conferred privileged status on Walzer in the political discourse of his country. He has just published a new book, this one entitled *The Paradox of Liberation*, in which he inquires as to why diverse national liberation movements that began in exceedingly promising fashion –in liberal and democratic terms- end up eclipsed by fundamentalist religious forces. The prototypical cases to which Walzer refers are India, Algeria, and Israel, each with its distinctive characteristics, but all sharing a common sociopolitical process: the movements emerge from the typically liberal Left but are eventually monopolized by the religious Right. Walzer's assertion is that the democratic structures already in existence are not always quashed, but they do change in their essence. His core point is that the original movement loses political and cultural hegemony, as illustrated by his case studies, in the face of the Hindu, Islamist, and Orthodox hordes, respectively: the role of religion, notes the author, is the perennially underestimated factor in human motivation. It seems evident that timing of this book's

publication is not random: Walzer is not caught off-guard by the unfolding of the so-called “Arab Spring”.

Congress on occasion is like a circus, if not a zoo. Representatives and Senators outdo themselves in their grievances, their sudden merciless, frequently uninformed, discourses. It would appear that an anthropological study of such a peculiar institution would not be superfluous. That is exactly what Emma Crewe has done on undertaking the British Parliament in *The House of Commons*, and the result is as enlightening as it is amusing. Crewe investigates the conflict, cooperation, allegiances, ideology, political calculation and, in general, the motivations of those who enter there, the relations among leaders, their closeness to or distance from their constituencies and the tension between doing something relevant (in terms of personal headway, partisan triumphs or voter benefit) and cultivating a political career. The book depicts the contradictions of parliamentary life, but above all the difficult choices that stand hard by those asserting that they want to change the world.

Thomas De Quincey claimed that certain books existed only to teach their readers, while others changed the world by transforming and motivating them. The first he called a “literature of knowledge”, the second, a “literature of power”. You, gentle reader, decide what these are.

www.cidac.org

@lrubiof