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Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy
and Japan (review)

R. J. B. Bosworth

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ing several public corporations, in corporate accounting, in public spending for information technology, and elsewhere.

Of equal importance, and largely unexamined in this book, many Japanese corporations have begun making substantial changes to enhance their global competitiveness. These will ultimately contribute to overall national growth. Moreover, though still far less welcoming of incoming foreign direct investment than any other industrialized democracy, Japan has become far more receptive to foreign mergers and acquisitions in numerous key areas from finance to auto production, creating new sources of dynamism and competitiveness within the Japanese domestic market. Such changes on the corporate front may prove to be at least as important as those taking place in national politics.

The real question that neither George Mulgan nor I can yet answer is whether the changes that have occurred so far will be built upon and thus create momentum for still further changes or whether, instead, they will remain stillborn, perhaps even subject to rollback by some antireform successor to Koizumi. Perhaps because my expectations are less dramatic than hers, perhaps because I believe in the long-term momentum of even incremental institutional changes, or perhaps because I see no sustainable economic future for Japan without substantial reforms, I find myself impressed by George Mulgan's sweeping evidence, but drawing somewhat more optimistic conclusions than she does about Japan's future.

Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan.

By Richard J. Samuels. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2003. xiv, 456 pages. \$39.95.

Reviewed by

R. J. B. BOSWORTH

University of Western Australia

Richard Samuels has written an extraordinarily ambitious and, in large part, successful book. *Machiavelli's Children* has two overt themes and an implicit one. It compares and contrasts Italian and Japanese political and economic history from the mid-nineteenth century until the present. It explores the nature and meaning of leadership. And, less wittingly, it expresses American dreams and nightmares in the early twenty-first century.

In echo of its epic intent, it is arranged in 12 chapters, three in each of four parts. They deal with "Creation Stories" (the Risorgimento in Italy and the Meiji Restoration in Japan), "Liberal Exhaustion" (the failure to avoid

an authoritarian drift into what Samuels calls "fascism" in each country), "In the American Imperium" (the ambiguous revival of the two nations after their defeats in their special Second World Wars), and "Degrees of Freedom" (the fate of each country in the post-end-of-history 1990s). With conscious parallel to Plutarch, each chapter illuminates some major individuals, in pairs, trios, and groups of four, while the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini dominates chapter six. Samuels does not allow himself to be too confined by this dualing of the past. When he reviews the history of the Italian Communist Party through Achille Occhetto, for example, he also finds time to set Palmiro Togliatti, Enrico Berlinguer, and a number of other significant people into his story. Even Mussolini is subjected to comparison in his chapter, with Gabriele D'Annunzio in Italy and with Kita Ikki and his successors in Japan. In other words, Samuels writes as an adaptable contemporary Plutarch, and, like his classical predecessor, as shall be examined further below, he possesses a clear moral purpose.

A generation ago, W. K. Hancock, himself a historian of the Risorgimento, of Britain and its empire, and of Australia, pronounced that scholars' merit depends first and foremost on their "span," their willingness to range widely and to confront the biggest issues. Samuels passes the Hancock test. Span is one of the most obvious and attractive features of *Machiavelli's Children*. The book is based on vast reading in the secondary literature and is consistently courageous in its effort to understand the human condition, in Italy and Japan, and elsewhere.

The more timid among us may reply fearfully that "comparisons are odorous" and wonder at Samuels's choice in seeking parallels between a European and an Asian society. Moreover, in his conclusion, Samuels acknowledges that "Italy and Japan differ in fundamental and irreconcilable ways" and adds that "the question that animates my research has been why they remain so different" (p. 360). Yet, perhaps he concedes too much here since, in the rest of his book, he displays difference but also much that was, and, indeed, is similar.

In any case, in our relativist world, comparison is always the beginning of wisdom. No intellectual endeavor is possible without it. Samuels has his predecessors. "The model of fascism"—always contrasting Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and adding to taste Franco's Spain, Vichy France, the doings of the Legion of the Archangel Michael in Romania and of the Arrow Cross in Hungary, many another group in interwar Europe given to donning colored shirts, a movement in Australia that preferred gray suits, perhaps Baathists in contemporary Syria and almost contemporary Iraq—has launched a thousand monographs. Its triumphant rival, the "model of totalitarianism," took the phrase *lo stato totalitario* from its relatively humble and tautologous origins in 1920s Italy to world power. The idea that the "West" was virtuously mobilized against totalitarianism, defined as the

supremely evil combination of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR (Fascist Italy rapidly fell out of the picture), underpinned the first and second cold wars and has readily been transferred to the battle against “terrorists” who are now, it seems, “our” implacable, if otherwise vaguely defined, enemies.

These great comparisons have not stood alone. Barrington Moore bestrode the world as he charted different paths to modernity across the continents and did so with a chronological range from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Charlie Maier made a name for himself with a massive account of the 1920s “recasting” (a nicely arch word) of the First World War-damaged bourgeoisie in Fascist Italy, Republican France, and Weimar Republic Germany. Less remembered are those “convergence theorists” who, for a while in the 1960s and 1970s, took to urging the parallels they saw in the United States and USSR. The list of attempts at comparison is myriad, and Samuels deserves an honored place on it.

As soon as the comparison is launched, it is plain that Italian and Japanese histories move in a sort of lock-step from their (partial) unification (called in each a reunification) during the 1860s, through a conflict between liberal institutions and/or practice into an interwar version of dictatorship, and on to a restored “democracy” after 1945, if one under American aegis and fretted by grand “corruption.” For any seeking to review the functioning of their politics, modern Italy and Japan have seemed, and still seem, nations where a comprehension of patron-client relations is more useful than a knowledge of ideology. Despite their moments of “failure” and humiliation, the two countries have flourished economically. Present-day Italians and Japanese are wealthy in ways their ancestors could not have dreamed of being a century and a half ago. Furthermore, at least after their Second World Wars (and half of Samuels’s book is focused on the postwar period), neither country has aspired to be “top nation” in the way parodied in that great study of the nature of history, *1066 and All That*. Rather, they accepted the American hegemony, made occasional obeisance to the Soviet power while it still possessed some credibility, and got on with being themselves—perhaps a little anxiously, a little fearful that they might not be genuinely “great,” but, in most ways, with a humility and good sense that has been of enormous benefit to their populace and to the world.

Samuels, it is plain, has much to compare, and his comparisons are frequently brilliant. In a set of aphorisms, he provides a trove of exam questions and a stimulus for much scholarship to come. Thus he tells us challengingly: “Italy was born of liberal aspirations for the nation, Japan of nationalist ones for the state” (p. 21). “The failure of Italian and Japanese liberalism was due in part to the failure of Hara and Giolitti to reach the masses with compelling ideas about a shared national project” (p. 123). “The crisis of representative government that gripped Italy and Japan had

many of the same features [following the First World War, and so] there came to be broad popular consent to authoritarianism in both countries" (p. 27). After 1945, "despite constitutional changes, the bureaucracy, the entrepreneurial class, and many institutions survived virtually unscathed" (p. 184). The Liberal and Christian Democratic Parties "forged dominant and remarkably similar party systems . . . built on patronage, rural voters, and business support, enabling a pragmatic but splintered ruling class to govern at the center without flying apart" (p. 186). During the cold war, "Italy and Japan were pawns in a global ideological war, and their citizens were pawns in ideological civil wars" (p. 263).

The comparisons Samuels makes are not always positive. He can also discern difference and express it trenchantly and well. "Although Japanese government leaders were less prescient than some have posited—they had no coherent master plan—they were quicker than their Italian contemporaries to understand the risks and benefits of [financial] self-reliance" (p. 95). "Few Italians and fewer Japanese [after 1945] worshipped at the liberal church" (p. 193). "The consolidation of national identity remains far more an Italian problem than a Japanese one" (p. 276).

In sum, the comparison between Italy and Japan is worth making, and Samuels is confident, wide-ranging, and sensitive enough to make it. *Machiavelli's Children* is a book that can be scanned with profit and stimulation by any national historian of the two countries as well as by those whose expertise lies in other fields but who like their minds teased and extended.

Samuels's second concentration is leadership. Here I must confess to having been less convinced and less impressed. In his preface and introduction, Samuels sets up what sounds like a straw man. His view is that present-day scholars are persistently engaged in a politically nefarious project to write off leadership and agency. His book will righten this misguided drift since, as he states in his first sentence, "it is obvious that leaders matter" (p. 1). He goes on to explain: "I conceive of leaders as political actors who have a greater range of assets than others in the community for 'stretching' the constraints of geography and natural resources, institutional legacies, and international location." Leaders differ, of course, he admits. They can opt for "bricolage" or "revolution"; they can prefer "inspiring," "buying," or "bullying" (pp. 6–8). But none can deny that they change their nations' pasts, presents, and futures.

Perhaps. Samuels begins his book with a quotation from E. H. Carr's durable *What Is History?* urging that "an outstanding individual . . . is at once a product and an agent of the historical process" (p. ix). He could have added Carr's view elsewhere that "all human actions are both free and determined, according to the point of view from which one considers them." I am astonished to be told that our own present somehow downplays leadership and free will. I would have thought that the contemporary hegemony

of the United States and of liberal capitalism is obsessed with spinning leaders into our minds, no matter how moronic and weak they may actually be. Politicians, CEOs, sport stars, and celebrities all “lead,” or seem to lead, from dawn to dusk, converted into little gods by the propaganda of the moment. I thus find the idea of restoring lost leaders to the histories of Italy and Japan an odd one. They have never been lost; the literature and our ordinary discourse brim with their alleged deeds.

Equally troubling is the way Samuels charts and proves “leadership.” It may disadvantage me as a reader that I am a historian and not a political scientist. My fondness for the particular may make me gag at the nomothetic case Samuels seeks to present. In my mind, models are often useful in providing questions, but rarely good at giving complete answers. So, as I read *Machiavelli’s Children*, I usually wanted more detail from Samuels when he assured me that some “leader” had circumvented constraint but did so in a very brief compass and without, for example, examining the decision-making process in a particular regime or at a special time. Mussolini gets the most detailed treatment of all Samuels’s leaders. But was he really a man with “no counterpart in Japanese history and few in the annals of Western civilization” (p. 155)? And is it really true that “by the late 1930s, he had changed a normal constitutional government into a thoroughly Fascist state that maximized his personal tyranny” (p. 165)? Samuels’s own words hint at a contradiction and complexity *Machiavelli’s Children* does not fully explain. The historian in me yearned for the process of Fascist administration in Italy to be subjected to further analysis, the occasions that the *Duce* was genuinely original separated from the moments when he “worked towards the Italians.” It was good to hear Samuels’s questions but, before agreeing with his answers, I wanted more narrative, more detail, more nuance. His arguments did not shake my basic belief that leadership mostly lies in the eye of the beholder (however often entranced by propaganda and myth).

This focus on “leadership” is where the book evidently becomes a moral tract about the contemporary United States, with its enormous or overweening power, and its profound post-September 11 anxiety that its power is threatened or hollow. Samuels’s last sentence exhorts his readers to believe that “we live not in a world of predestination but a world of possibilities” (p. 361). Yes and no is my response, and better always to qualify the optimism of the will encouraged by such belief with a pessimism of the intellect that subjects all purported leaders and all of us to constant and severe criticism and doubt. Otherwise, the exaltation of the triumph of the will and of leadership will produce more preemptive wars and more preventive assassinations of alleged political enemies. Rather than bringing hope, it will install a savagely Darwinian new world order, which all sensible Japanese, Italians, Australians, and non-Americans will want humbly to sit out.