

## MACHIAVELLI:

### EXPERIENCE AND SPECULATION

The extremely pernicious and paganly immoral principles stated by the Florentine secretary run counter to all national thought and have incontestably exercised a corrupting influence on it.

F. Schlegel

We must be grateful to Machiavelli and other writers who like him have openly and without dissimulation shown not how men ought to act, but how they do normally act.

F. Bacon

The interpretation of Machiavelli's philosophy of history encounters specific difficulties. His contribution to the history of thought is unique and yet rooted in the culture that was typical of the Renaissance; it constitutes—something rarely found among the creative spirits of the High Renaissance—the logical-historical limit of that culture, the critical point at which the contradictions that characterize it tragically come to light.<sup>1</sup>

Translated from the French by Jeanne Ferguson.

<sup>1</sup> In 1977 Machiavelli's jubilee was celebrated in the Soviet Union with a

However, there is this other aspect of the subject: the refusal to extend to Machiavelli the traditional respect enjoyed by Renaissance culture in general. Recent examples of this neglect are not lacking: Virgilio Titone, in his book magisterially entitled *Political Thought in the Baroque Period*, says without hesitation that Machiavelli gave “a morbid and *a priori* preference to the most cruel and impious means.”<sup>2</sup> The author sees in Machiavelli the precursor of “contemporary ideologues” and reproaches him for “a love for formulas and arbitrary distinctions, a scorn for commonly-accepted morals, a penchant for violence at the state level and a tendency to present the single fact as a universal theory.” He adds, “Naturally, authoritarian regimes glorified him as an incomparable preceptor in the art of governing. The very ones who saw in Machiavellism a veritable collection of advice to criminals acknowledge Machiavelli as a superior talent.” Titone himself refuses to do so. Such a petty insult would not merit attention if it did not correspond to a certain “mass conscience” and if the accusations of “voluntarism” and “anti-historicism” brought against the Renaissance thinker—witnessing to the complete anti-historicism of Titone himself—did not express with rare frankness an often-found, though less obvious, fault in historical literature.

Where Machiavelli is concerned, the inconvenience caused by contemporary ideological stereotypes combines in an odd way with the real difficulties of research. To tell the truth, our historicism is severely tried by this burning subject. Exactly what is the obstacle? Are we discomfited by its contemporary nature or, on the contrary, by its great distance from us? By the anachronism of our understanding of *The Prince* or by the paradoxical nature of the work itself?

The problem of interpreting Machiavelli was not really discovered until the twentieth century, and in this sense it belongs to the twentieth century. It appears when we try to apply our own yardstick to Machiavelli while recognizing its relativity and

series of scientific conferences devoted to him, especially in Leningrad, within the cadre of the Scientific Council of World Culture, an organ of the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union.

<sup>2</sup> Virgilio Titone, *Il pensiero politico nell'età barocca*, Caltanissetta, Rome, 1974, pp. 38, 40, 44-45.

when we attempt—differently from Titone—to understand the structure of *his* thought by engaging in a conscious dialogue with the Florentine secretary (and with the Renaissance). The past reveals its originality when we try to introduce our own conceptions into it (conceptions, therefore, that are foreign to it), not to impose them but so that under the effect of the resistance of the materials they undergo internal changes proving the sovereignty of the distant culture.

Unfortunately, those historians who defend Machiavelli often do so at the same level of thought as that of his detractors.<sup>3</sup> They affirm that Machiavelli was a realist in politics, that he proceeded from experience and not from ideas drawn from books. They refer to his “lucidity,” to his “scientific approach.” In other words, they apply familiar, present-day images to a 16th-century writer, but *without* critical reflection. Here I shall analyze the pertinence of some of these extrapolations.

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In his correspondence (April-October, 1513) with the Florentine ambassador to the Roman Curia, Francesco Vettori, on the eve of writing *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses in detail, and with passionate interest, the possible consequence of the unexpected truce between Spain and France as well as the conditions under which Italy could take advantage of the occasion. He counters Vettori's opinions with his own plan and analyzes the pros and cons of “your peace” and “my peace”: “You do not want this luckless King of France to re-enter Lombardy, but I do”; “I foresee in this a great deal of trouble with England”; “I do not want Spain and the Pope to go to war”; “If I were in the Pope's place...”; “but if peace is concluded under the conditions I describe” and so on. The former functionary of the Florentine Republic mentally moves armies, conducts negotiations with great powers, evaluates the existing forces and takes the place of the kings on the European political chess-board. This could appear a pleasantry, if we did not know today that the letters to Vettori

<sup>3</sup> Chrestomathy of four centuries of reflections on Machiavelli edited in Boston in 1960 with the title *Machiavelli—the Cynic, the Patriot, the Politician*.

were written by the greatest political mind of the 16th century. Even Machiavelli's friends did not suspect his true dimensions, although they held his experience and caustic wit in great esteem.

Acting as Second Chancellor, in charge of editing documents for the Council of Ten, traveling all over the country on military and administrative business and carrying out diplomatic missions entrusted to him by those in power in Florence, Machiavelli still was never among those who decided Florentine policy. The importance of the position he held for almost fifteen years is often exaggerated. However, during all those years he was right in the middle of things and events, he displayed an incredible energy and in spite of everything was able to influence men such as the *gonfaloniere* Piero Soderini, on whom many things depended. After the restoration of the Medici in 1512 Machiavelli was exiled and condemned to complete inactivity, but his brain of a professional politician—of a man of a completely new turn of mind—could not stop working. He suffocated without the daily information he needed in order to penetrate the intentions of others, to reason out and foresee, as he had in the past: 'Mister Ambassador, I am writing to you more in anticipation of your wishes than that I really know what I am talking about. Therefore, I will ask you to let me know in your next letter what is happening in the world, what is hoped for and what feared—if you would be so kind—so that in such important matters I might be a solid support for you...' <sup>4</sup>

If we ignore this dominant psychological trait, if we do not understand this thirst for useful activity and how the fact of living as a simple citizen went against his grain and was a torture for Machiavelli, we will not understand his work, which, by the way, remained unpublished and unknown during his lifetime. His work prolonged and replaced his participation in state affairs. *The Prince* was written during his first year of exile, when he was forty-four: "If only they [Giuliano de' Medici, the new master of Florence] would read it, they would see that during the fifteen years I devoted to state affairs I neither slept nor wasted my time; everyone should set his heart on having an experienced

<sup>4</sup> All the letters quoted here are from the edition *Niccolò Machiavelli, Opere*, Vol. VI, *Lettere*, ed. F. Gaeta, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1961.

man in his service...”<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli wrote little before his exile if we exclude the thousands of diplomatic letters, of course, and some reports and memoirs, such as “Elucidation on Measures Taken by the Florentine Republic for the Pacification of Pistoia” or “Exposé on the Way in Which the Duke de Valentinois Assassinated Vitellozzo Vitelli.” It was exile, therefore, that forced him to become an author. He explains very simply in the prologue to *The Mandrake*, the finest comedy of the Italian Renaissance, that the play was written because the author “did not know where to direct his efforts; he was forbidden to exercise a different talent in a different sort of work...” He could have said the same about *Discourse on the First Decade of Livy*, his most important theoretical treatise, or about his *History of Florence*. The Florentine administration most certainly deprived itself of the most talented collaborator in all its history, but humanity thereby gained a great thinker. In all probability, no one would today recall the name of Machiavelli if the intrigues of the prelate Ardinghelli had not blackened it in the eyes of the Medici and contributed to prolonging his exile.

We read in the famous letter of December 10, 1513 to Vettori: “My brain is becoming moss-covered, and I abandon myself to the perfidy of Fortune, almost content that she threw me so low and curious to see if she will not end by blushing for it.” Strong and dramatic words. One page farther on, nevertheless, we find this simple reflection, perhaps more moving: “I cannot remain like this for long (*lungo tempo non posso star così*).” We ourselves know what he did not when he wrote those lines, namely, that the situation was to last another fourteen years, that is, until his death.

Why did Machiavelli not leave San Casciano, where no one took much account of him, and why did he not offer his services elsewhere, far from Florence? We are given the answer in the last chapter of *The Prince*, in which all his patriotic passion and suffering are expressed. He could not, like Aretino, become a *condottiere* of the pen. He could not even imagine himself away from Florence. In spite of the fascinating side of a “state career,”

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Francesco Vettori, December 10, 1513.

its rules and its secrets, Machiavelli's interest in it was not purely technical.

He defended his ideas with the conviction that he was "serving Italy"; "this will always be the most dear to me, because I am a calm man, occupied with my pleasures and whims, but of all my pleasures the greatest for me is to see our city happy. I love in a general way all its citizens, its laws, its customs, its walls, its houses, its streets, its churches, its countryside, and nothing causes me greater pain than to think that this city suffers from privation and all the evils that came to my mind on the road that led to my ruin." The style is not that of Machiavelli. This passage is taken from a letter to Machiavelli from Francesco Vettori, but for its vein it could have been signed by the exile at San Casciano, except that we would not say that Machiavelli was a "calm man." Machiavelli's patriotism, mixed with this same communal traditional leavening, was much less provincial and certainly more complex and tragic. His dimensions and his relations with his fellow citizens were on a scale not with Vettori but with Dante. Machiavelli expressed himself in quite a different tone, ironic and bitter, with a typically Florentine humor and at the same time completely personal. His letter of May 17, 1521 to Francesco Guicciardini begins: "I was sitting in my privy, meditating on the strangenesses of this world, when your messenger arrived. I was completely absorbed in imagining a preacher for Florence who would be to my taste, that is, one that I would like, because I know I am a rebel in that as in my other opinions. And as much as I have tried never to miss an occasion for serving this republic whenever I could, if not through my actions, at least through my words; if not through my words, at least through signs; I do not intend to deprive her of the counsels that are her due. To tell the truth, I know that there again I am going to separate myself from the opinion of her citizens, as I have in many other things. They would like a preacher who would tell them what they must do to get to Heaven, and I would like one who would teach them how to go straight to the Devil; they would like a reasonable, sure man, and I would like one crazier than Ponzo,<sup>6</sup> shrewder

<sup>6</sup> Ponzo was an adversary of Savonarola.

than Savonarola, more hypocritical than Brother Alberto,<sup>7</sup> because I would find it especially pleasant and worthy of our marvelous times to have combined in one single monk what all the others offer us. This seems to me the true road to Paradise: learn to know the road to Hell so as to avoid it.” Cynical? Yes, but not difficult to understand. He teaches that perfidy and hypocrisy cannot be avoided in politics, but he himself always speaks with alarming frankness. His homely face was never free from an ironic expression. He was awkward in diplomatic periphrases and courtly manners; he always behaved with dignity, with little concern for what people would say, and he paid for it. In spite of all the years spent in the service of Florence, he did not accumulate a fortune; in spite of his astonishing theoretical precepts for getting ahead and getting out of trouble, he himself was the eternal loser. When the Medici regime collapsed in 1527 and he could finally return to Florence, at 58 and a few weeks before his end, he applied for the post he had formerly occupied when he was still young, but the Great Council voted down his appointment, fifty-five to twelve.

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Thus it was political experience that inspired *The Prince* and upon which it rests. In it, as in all his works, Machiavelli speaks as a man *pieno di esperienza*, reasoning and counseling on the basis of his experience. What did this experience consist of? The answer is found on the first page—in “my understanding of the deeds of great men, won by me from a long acquaintance with contemporary affairs and a continuous study of the ancient world.” (p. 29)<sup>8</sup> In other words, these deeds could just as well be those of Hannibal as of Cesare Borgia, and the events could have occurred the day before or fifteen hundred years before, could have been experienced by the author or read about in Livy—everything was put on exactly the same level. Like all

<sup>7</sup> Alberto is most probably Alberto da Orvieto, sent to Florence by Alexander VI in 1495. He may also be the monk in the second novella of the Fourth Day in the *Decameron*.

<sup>8</sup> The arabic numerals refer to pages in the Penguin edition of *The Prince*, translated by George Bull, 1964.

men of his time, Machiavelli saw no difference unless it was that “then virtue reigned and now it is vice—and this is as clear as day.” (II, 1)<sup>9</sup>

Having begun by affirming the empiricism of Machiavelli’s thought, we must immediately append some important restrictions and particulars that in retrospect give a rather paradoxical nature to that empiricism.

Machiavelli is often presented as having destroyed the humanist perception of the world that was proper to the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, in his general, profound and “typological” attitudes, his way of thinking remains, in spite of everything, within the framework of the humanist tradition of the Renaissance. This is what explains that it never occurred to him to oppose the immediate experience of politics to the speculative experience of the historian, or at least not to make a distinction between them. The opposition in his own life was different—between a “low” life that he dissipated with the gross amusements of the country tavern and a “high” life, which included participation in “contemporary affairs” as well as the assiduous reading of the Roman classics: “When evening comes, I return to the house and go into my study. As I cross the sill I shed my everyday rags covered with mud and mire and put on royal and sumptuous raiment. Thus dressed appropriately, I enter the courts of the men of antiquity. They receive me affectionately, and I partake of that nourishment which *alone* is mine and for which I was born; there I converse with them without the slightest difficulty, I ask them about the reasons for their actions (*della ragione*); and they in their kindness respond. And for four hours I do not feel the slightest discomfort, I forget my worries, I do not fear poverty, and death itself does not frighten me: I give myself over entirely to them.”<sup>10</sup>

The author of *The Prince* not only included in his idea of “experience” the idealized figures of the men of antiquity (and following these models transfigured Castruccio Castracani or Ce-

<sup>9</sup> Roman numerals followed by arabic numerals refer to books and chapters of *Discourse on the First Decade of Livy (“Discorsi”)* from *Machiavelli, Le Opere*, ed. Gian Berardi, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> *Lettere*, op. cit., p. 304.



sare Borgia, prototypes of the “wise prince”) but sought in experience certain eternally reasonable and exemplary qualities (*ragioni*). From this comes his sententious tone, which was not his alone but may also be found when we compare his reflections and style with those of Leonardo da Vinci. In the famous aphorisms of *The Prince* (“whoever has good troops has good friends,” “all armed prophets have conquered and unarmed prophets have come to grief”) there is the conviction that any political situation can be appreciated starting from a knowledge of human nature: this does not change “in order, movement or style” any more than “the sky, the sun and the elements” (I, Introduction). *The Prince* is a guide for the career of politics, it is constructed around typical “examples” from which are deduced “rational bases.” It is thus very close in its genre to the treatises on painting by Leon Battista Alberti or Leonardo.

It is an empiricism imbued with humanist and rationalist pertinence. When he cannot distinguish the *ragioni*, the Renaissance man is disconcerted and begins to feel a sense of tragedy.

Francesco Vettori wrote in a letter to San Casciano: ‘My dear friend, although I am often overcome by the fact that events occur against all reason (*non procedino con ragione*) and that it is stupid to talk about them, think about them or argue over them, one who has been accustomed to such judgments for forty years can no longer voluntarily put an end to them and turn toward new habits and thoughts; this is why I should like to be near you to see if we could not correct this world, or at least this part of the world, which seems to me very difficult to do, even in imagination, and that I would consider completely impossible if it meant going into direct action.’ On April 9, 1513, just before beginning *The Prince*, Machiavelli answered (actually in response to a previous letter in which Vettori had voiced the same complaints) that “all reasoning and calculation collapse”. “If you find it detestable now to speak of events, considering that they most often occur in contradiction to all logic and all expectation, you are right—the same thing happens with me. Nevertheless, it is easier for me to say that to you than to rid my head of chimeras, because Fortune decreed that I should understand nothing about the manufacture of silk nor the manufacture of wool, nor of profits and losses, and that I can only speak about

the State; I either have to talk about that or hold my tongue.”

In the book we easily distinguish between these two voices as they blend and argue—on the one hand, historical skepticism, on the other “chimeras,” on the one hand despair, on the other hope. We can easily see that the political man (like any man of action, though less obviously) cannot base his calculations on hoped-for things in defiance of reality, and neither can he hold only to reality, because in the one case as in the other he would cease to be a true political man. Unfortunately, the attempt to make these two needs coincide is almost as difficult as catching a hedgehog: paradoxes bristle at every point. However, this explanation is too elementary and lacks historical dimension. Several generations of scholars have tried to understand how the pitilessly lucid analyst who was Machiavelli could state that the Italians, “disheartened by foreign domination”, were quite ready to rally around a “new prince” should he ever raise his banner. How could this author, who spoke cold reason and disdained any sentimentality or artifice, have recourse to inflammatory rhetoric? Certainly, the so-called impassivity of Machiavelli is an invention that has long been abandoned, but just the same, political illusions, unrealizable projects... from Machiavelli?

In order to understand, we must start with the idea that if Machiavelli’s preoccupations are on the practical level, his turn of mind is nonetheless theoretical. His correspondence with Vettori, in which he accumulates detailed calculations on current affairs, serves him as an assembly-bench; there he cultivates and verifies the speculative formulas of *The Prince*. Therefore, to penetrate the character of Ferdinand of Aragon it was first necessary to have deciphered human nature and world history, and in this Machiavelli’s approach shows with particular clarity the difference in level in the two correspondents, however close they were in spirit—one subtle and gifted, the other brilliant. What we have said of the literary activity of Machiavelli as a necessary substitute and prolongation of his practical activity is not absolutely exact, because in fact the Florentine secretary was above all interested in the general sense of events. In short, everything combined with his politics: participation in events, observation from a distance and reflection. However, this integration carried with it a certain number of contradictions. By becoming integrated

into the structure of theory, experience and the need for action introduced a tension. In Machiavelli's mind, it was no longer "practice" in a dialogue with "theory" but theory reasoning with itself. It is only on the surface that Machiavelli's thought seems as dry as a graphic and as orderly as a Florentine painting. Beneath this first impression we find something ungraspable, a *sfumato alla Leonardo*, a mystery.

Machiavelli measured the contemporary period and antiquity with the same yardstick, since for him all history was a manifestation of human nature. He did not admit (or had not yet admitted) other motivating principles of history (providential, metaphysical or some objective exterior reality). This is why, even when he endeavored, in his exegesis of Polybius or Aristotle, to extract some natural logic from the succession of forms of government and alternating phases of rise and fall in history, or when he ascribed the incessant oscillations of history to unforeseeable spontaneity, the fundamental element remained, in one case as in the other, human motives and men's actions. His historical laws, if the expression is applicable here, appear as a collection of ethical maxims. The "theory" of Machiavelli little resembles theory as we understand it, and the same is true for "practice."

We find "the same passions and the same desires" in all peoples, all men and all epochs (I, 39). Nor do the rules of the game change: "The world has always been the same, and in the world there has always been as much good as bad" (II, Introduction). The naturalism of Machiavelli's philosophy inevitably leads to the idea of "imitation" of models of the distant past and modernity. "The prince should *read* history, *studying* the actions of eminent men to *see* how they conducted themselves in war and to *discover* the reasons for their victories and their defeats, so that he can *imitate* the former and *avoid* the latter" (p. 89).<sup>11</sup> A logical punctuation emphasized by the use of verbs of action—*leggere*, *considerare*, *vedere*, *esaminare*, *imitare* and *fuggire*—is exactly Machiavelli's style. In return, the idea of "imitation" borrowed from antiquity is an idea that he shares with all the humanism of the Renaissance. Machiavelli, however,

<sup>11</sup> This is my underlining (L.B.).

gives it a special interpretation.

This idea is essential but, it seems, in contradiction with the sovereign creative will of the Renaissance. However, let us see what Machiavelli wrote in a letter to Francesco Guicciardini on May, 17, 1526: “No longer trust to temporizing, do not count on Fortune or time, because the same thing does not always happen with time and Fortune is undependable.” Each epoch is similar to antiquity but “in its own key” (II, 43). In other words, history repeats itself and does not repeat itself? Machiavelli is nonetheless logical in his own way. The problem is that human nature, like all nature, is varied. It is impossible to “entirely keep to the tracks of others or emulate the prowess of their models” (p. 49). Imitation must not therefore be literal or entire, although there must be a norm to provide orientation: expert archers always aim much higher than their target when it is distant. No less varied is the concatenation of circumstances— which Machiavelli calls *la qualità de’ tempi*. The unchanging essence is seen as “a variety of accidents (*varietà degli accidenti*)” (I, Introduction). Human nature is different according to time and place. Within the framework of its universality, the world of history with its many nuances constantly varies. Universality and the normative give history the unity and permanence without which it would lose its instructive quality. However, the essential interest of the Renaissance moved from the framework itself to the contents of the framework. Machiavelli schematically reduces any concrete event to a norm of human nature and history, but this norm does not exist as a true universal force, it is neither above nor before history, it is motley history itself, its variety, in short, the “example” of the *casus*. “Variety” makes it seem that the norm is reborn each time, that each present has its “own encounter” with antiquity, which explains why it will never be easy to recognize the norm in the case. But the art of politics consists exactly in that.

Between the schematization of “example” and the reanimation of the schemas in the “examples” appears a certain space within which Machiavelli’s thought moves. Contingency, variability, diversity become themselves the essential norm of nature. The relation is thus inverted: theoretical observations on “rational bases” constantly go back to the *casus*. The general, in short,

coincides with the “variety of the cases;” we find ourselves confronted with the historicity of the Renaissance, different from ours but fundamentally distinct from the medieval idea of a sacred essence always resembling itself, in which the individual and the concrete are only veils. For Machiavelli history does not develop of itself but neither is it traced once and for all by divine will. It does not appear as a river flowing from one point to another but as a sea agitated by winds and currents, always the same and always different.

To the degree that Machiavellian theorization essentially consists in rethinking the individual, it is “artistic.” We find the same thing in Leonardo da Vinci, whose pronouncements are often contradictory, in spite of a cultural and organic non-contradiction that refuses to disclose itself in front of reason. It is through the inter-relation of the idealized and the real, the norm and the variety, that Machiavelli’s thought reveals its affinity with the art of the High Renaissance and that Machiavelli reveals in a general way his personality as a Renaissance man.

However, let us go back to “variety.” Machiavelli writes: “I believe that just as Nature has given different faces to men she has also given them different characters and whims, and each person, therefore, must act according to his character and whim. On the other hand, since times change and circumstances are of all kinds, they agree or disagree with human desires and thus happy is the man whose conduct is in accord with the nature of the times and unhappy the one whose actions neither correspond to the times nor the circumstances (*l'ordine delle cose*). From which it happens that two men behaving differently may quite well end up with the same result, each having been able to take things as they appeared to him, because there are as many orders of things as there are provinces and states. But since time and circumstances often vary, as much in their entirety as in their details, and men do not change their whims nor their conduct, it follows that for one and the same man Fortune is sometimes favorable, sometimes adverse” (extract from the letter to Piero Soderini: compare XXV). Such is the basic idea of Machiavelli on the reasons for success and failure in politics; he often repeats it with many details (compare for example III, 9). The historical result is always found at the intersection of “the way to proceed

(*il modo del procedere*)” and “the order of things,” the latter being a variable while the former, which corresponds to the individual character, is a constant: a man’s conduct is inseparable from his congenital characteristics: he does not have the ability to make himself over. “If (a man) changed his character according to the time and circumstances, then his fortune would not change” (p. 132). “In truth, the one who would be wise enough to learn to recognize the nature of the times and circumstances would always find favor with Fortune or would be able to protect himself from bad luck, and in this case the saying that the wise man commands the stars and destiny would be verified. But since such wise men do not exist and since men are, firstly, shortsighted and secondly, unable to dominate their nature, Fortune is inconstant, she leads men where she will and keeps them under her heel.” (Extract from the same letter to Soderini: compare XXIV.)

Perfect! But then *The Prince* was written to no avail and generally speaking, no man can do anything because it is beyond his power to *act according to circumstances!* No “wise prince” can do it, because “such wise men do not exist.” It is clear, however, that Machiavelli was not at all a fatalist. On the contrary, in each chapter he presents the right way to go about choosing with flexibility and changing at the right time the color and means of politics: in such or such a situation it is good to imitate the humanity of Marcus Aurelius and in another situation it would be better to imitate the ferocity of Septimus Severus. The wise prince should have a “disposition varying as Fortune and circumstances dictate” (p. 101). “So these princes of ours, whose power had been established for many years, may not blame Fortune for their losses; their own indolence was to blame, because [they] never imagined when times were quiet that [things] could change (and this is a common failing of mankind, never to anticipate a storm when the sea is calm)...” (p. 129). If such is the case, why reproach the princes that fail?

How can all that be reconciled? If “there are no men reasonable enough to adapt” (to the changes in events) how can a wise prince have a “disposition varying as Fortune and circumstances dictate”? Machiavelli has been praised and insulted, but everyone has agreed in endowing him with a “pitiless logic,” a “very disciplined

sequence of ideas” (De Sanctis). However, it seems that, from a strictly logical point of view, naturalistic determinism and the conviction that man is able to dominate fortune do not fit together well and are purely and simply contradictory. Not logical? ...Machiavelli?

Let us take for example the last paragraph of Chapter XXV of *The Prince*. From a logical point of view, the first sentence renders the second inept: “I conclude, therefore, that as Fortune is changeable while men are obstinate in their ways, men prosper so long as Fortune and policy are in accord, and when there is a clash they fail. I hold strongly to this: that it is better to be impetuous than circumspect; because Fortune is a woman and if she is to be submissive it is necessary to beat and coerce her” (p. 133). In the first sentence we have, shall we say, voluntarism, the *virtù* of the Renaissance, virtue and courage—“The only sound, secure and enduring methods of defence are those based on your own actions and prowess” (p. 129). But where is the logic?

Did Machiavelli see a problem there? Without a doubt, if we may judge from the beginning of Chapter XXV. Only for him there was no logical antinomy, but the collision of two general ideas (*topos*), of two “opinions.” In order to understand how Machiavelli’s mind worked, let us now see how he formulated the problem and how he solved it: “God does not want to do everything himself, and take away from us our free choice and our share of the glory which belongs to us” (p. 135). This means that “Fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves” (p. 130). In the articulation of these two halves is, roughly, all the contradiction of the Renaissance—between immutable nature and individual challenge, between the ideal norm and practical experience. And in this contradiction are both the ardent desire to master history and the approaching tragedy.

Nevertheless, if the “practice” and the “theory” of Machiavelli do not correspond to the idea we have of practice and theory, perhaps there is no justification in calling Machiavelli illogical, perhaps Machiavelli gave a different meaning to the words we are using and perhaps he was guided by another logic—a logic of content, characteristic of Renaissance culture.

In Chapter XV we find this famous sentence: “I have thought

it proper to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined (*alla verità effettuale delle cose, che alla immaginazione di esse*)” (p. 90). Incontestably, without this very new opposition Machiavelli would not be Machiavelli, and to understand something of his work we must begin with this sentence. But what exactly does it mean? Where are the limits of this audacious refusal to discourse on “dreamed-up republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist” (p. 91) in order to occupy himself with real politics? In the conflict between “how one should live” and “how one does live” (p. 91)? This antithesis, the very way the question is posed, is the remarkable contribution of Machiavelli and the announcement of the method of scientific thought that characterized the new Europe. Nonetheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are in the presence of a writer of the Renaissance, who had behind him, certainly, several generations of enterprising and realistic Florentine “businessmen,” but nothing more. Now, “the real truth of things” is always a certain construction, a certain image of this truth. Machiavelli was one of the men who undermined feudal-medieval and confessional culture, but it would be dangerous to assign to his limpid, analytical prose a way of thinking that did not appear until much later, outside the limits of the Renaissance: due to it, perhaps, but also at its end.

The great De Sanctis held that Machiavelli had “given to politics a profoundly rational form.” He presented Machiavellism as “a science and a method” and established, seemingly for the first time, a bond between Machiavelli and Galileo, through the idea of “positive study.”<sup>12</sup> L. Olschki also envisaged this aspect in a work entitled *Machiavel—le savant*; Ernst Cassirer observed in 1944 that Machiavelli had “analyzed political movement in the same spirit that Galileo had analyzed physical movement.” This is perhaps going a little too far. We may add to the above the reflections of an eminent Italian critic, Luigi Firpo, who, bringing together Machiavelli and his “spiritual brothers” Brunelleschi, Sangallo and Leonardo wrongly assigns them “a sys-

<sup>12</sup> F. De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana* (quoted from the Russian edition: *Istoria italianskoj literatury*, Vol. II, Moscow, 1964, pp. 133-34).



tematic study, coherently developed reasoning and a rigorous method.”<sup>13</sup>

From that point to the birth of contemporary science there were only a few more steps to take. One hundred years separate Machiavelli from the first announcers of the “rigorous method” who were Galileo and Descartes. The retrospective and genetic link with Machiavelli, as with Leonardo, is beyond doubt. However, the beginning of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century are separated by an essential historical *caesura*. Even though there is a legacy between the two cultures, they are nonetheless of different types. If we apply the “rigorous method” we must recognize that the “scientificity” of Machiavelli is largely metaphorical; taken literally, it has an odor of anachronism.

We have already seen what Machiavelli understood by “the real truth of things”: “nature,” “imitation,” the eternal passions of men and the changes in fortune, the illustrious men of antiquity, the “Duke de Valentinois”—this “wise prince” viewed through Livy—and the still wiser and more glorious prince whose heroic conduct could rival that of Cyrus, Theseus and Moses. “Reality”, as Machiavelli conceived it, is strung taut between the ideal and the real, between the norm and the particular case. This tension finds its completion and disappears in “heroic” individuality. Machiavelli’s logic, however, is the “rational bases” that show through in reality, the *ragioni* of the Renaissance that humanists and painters looked for; it is that kind of logic that Machiavelli saw and not the one seen by Galileo. The “imaginary” utopian conceptions, as we say today, and that we must reject, are constructions that are based neither on “experience” nor on “reason,” and are consequently in contradiction with the cultural idealizations of *The Prince*.

On January 21, 1515 Machiavelli wrote to his friend Vettori: “Whoever would see our letters, honorable friend, and notice their diversity, would be greatly astonished, because believing at first that we are serious men, entirely turned toward great things and incapable of having a thought that is not of honor and greatness, it would appear to him, turning the page, that

<sup>13</sup> Luigi Firpo, “Nel V Centenario del Machiavelli,” in *Il pensiero politico di Machiavelli e la sua fortuna nel mondo*, Florence, 1972, pp. 4-7.

these same men are lightweight, profligate and occupied with futile things. But if someone finds our behavior shameful, I myself find it on the contrary worthy of praise, because we only imitate Nature, which is varied (*è varia*) and whoever imitates her does not merit reproaches.” For one who is familiar with the letters and way of life of Italian humanists of the 15th century, it is easy to recognize in this letter, as in many another of Machiavelli’s letters (notably the one in which he describes his conversations with the ancients after the arguments of the day with the rural cardplayers), the traditional clichés of the semantic “high” and “low”, in spite of the original stamp Machiavelli’s personality gives them. But the humanists always endeavored to harmonize the high and the low, the sublime and the trivial, while still making clear distinctions between them: the reality in which they lived was unified, not divided. With Machiavelli, on the contrary, humanist oppositions acquired an extreme sharpness, and it is in exactly that way that he will begin to batter the humanism of the Renaissance, by making this type of thinking a problem in itself. It is the debut of the crisis of the Renaissance, and Michelangelo would soon paint his *Last Judgment* and create all the hypertense plasticism that is characteristic of his last period.

D. Barberi-Squarotti, an Italian literary theorician, has analyzed *The Prince*, not at the level of the ideas it contains but at that of syntax, style, vocabulary and rhythm—all the means of expression of the language and their semantics.<sup>14</sup> This logico-linguistic study has permitted the clarification of the underlying structure of Machiavelli’s thought, infinitely more stable and homogeneous than appears in the conscious arrangement of ideas. Barberi-Squarotti has shown that Machiavelli always begins with ideal models and is not content with merely describing facts. His language either resolutely elevates reality or just as resolutely lowers it, thus creating a marked contrast between the two levels of reality—on the one hand that of the will and courage of the hero playing an active role in history and endeavoring to realize a prudent and audacious design (*il concetto*), on the other hand the realm of everyday reality that Fortune rules as she

<sup>14</sup> D. Barberi-Squarotti, *La forma tragica del “Principe,”* Florence, 1966.

pleases. With Machiavelli, then, “the relation to things becomes problematical” and is transformed into a permanent confrontation of the spirit and the elementary and routine human material of history. This opposition, classic and humanist in origin, takes on sharpness with Machiavelli because it is tinged with pessimism. This explains why Barberi-Squarotti sees an internal tragic form in Machiavelli’s work—even in *The Mandrake!*

I think he is entirely correct. This combat between the idealized spirit and prosaic circumstances suggests to us a comparison between Machiavelli and Michelangelo. We might say that the sculptor saw such or such an idea—the *concetto*—in the inert matter and achieved it through stone, that he treated stone the way politics, with Machiavelli, treated history and Fortune, who, being a woman, loves a strong hand; “heroic” esthetics, esthetics of difficulty, with Michelangelo (the formula is V. Binni’s) and ‘heroic’ politics with Machiavelli. This comparison may perhaps disconcert or shock, and the fact is that the two men, the artist and the political writer, were in many respects the exact opposites of each other. Nonetheless, both belonged to the same kind of culture. The author of *The Prince* was on the whole much closer to the sublime and monumental plasticity of the High Renaissance than we are inclined to think when interpreting in modern terms the good sense and penetration of the Florentine secretary, who spent his youth in the Florence of Lorenzo the Magnificent—as did Michelangelo and Leonardo.

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However, it is time to deal frankly with the reasons for which the position of Machiavelli in the pantheon of world culture is comparable to none other. I do not know any other author of Machiavelli’s dimension who, four hundred and fifty years after his death, has such a dark reputation in the eyes of respectable people, most of whom, to tell the truth, have never read him. Millions of people know his name only through having heard of “Machiavellism,” that is, the justification in politics of the blackest perfidy, violence and hypocrisy. “Machiavelli? The one who said the ends justify the means?” Behind this last sentence there are so many historical events and circumstances that no

one has the right to evade the answer by stating with the erudite condescension of the specialist that the subject is “not scientific,” and that Machiavelli does not need to be defended. What is the answer, then?

We might explain, first, that the ideas and reflections that are currently held to be the real points of view of Machiavelli (and the idea of Machiavellism itself) go back to the 16th century, and that the principal enemies of “Machiavellism” were the official and retrograde ideologues of every shade and hue, Protestants and Catholics alike. (In 1546 a memorial was circulated among the Fathers at the Council of Trent stating that *The Prince* was “written with the hand of Satan”; in 1559 all Machiavelli’s works were inscribed in the first Index of Forbidden Books). This point of view is correct. However, we find among the first accusers of Machiavelli men like Jean Bodin and Campanella...

We might also say that it is absurd to reproach Machiavelli for a political practice that existed before *The Prince* as well as after; that we must approach the judgments given by Machiavelli in a historical perspective and remember that what was understood as “*virtù*” in the ethic of the High Renaissance, all manifestations of originality, of vitality and activity, were admired and considered “sublime” and “heroic” qualities, independently of how they were applied. From Dante to Machiavelli, there was the greatest contempt for mediocre men: “Men cannot be bad with dignity (*onorevolmente cattivi*), or perfectly good; a certain perfidy sometimes brings with it greatness or some nobility, but men are not capable of that.” (I, 27) This explanation is also exact. We note in addition that the ideas expressed in his treatise were more or less audacious and even shocking for the times and that Machiavelli very well knew it.

We might say that we should not isolate one element of a system of thought, because it can only have its full meaning within the system. This way of thinking is at the origin of historiographic myths such as “Machiavelli the monarchist,” “Machiavelli the republican,” “the preceptor of tyrants,” “the forerunner of the *Risorgimento*.” This point of view is also exact, all the more so since throughout the centuries this had been the fate of all complex ideological structures and the wealth of meanings invites deformation; but we can almost always say why,

logically, such elements of a system lend themselves to this deformation in such or such a direction.

Finally, we might say that Machiavelli did not teach that all means are good in politics but that he only described and studied the habitual practice of “principates.” But there we get away from the truth. This is what he described: “Affairs are judged according to their end (was it attained?) and not according to the means (how was it attained?)” (extract from the letter to Soderini). Here is also what he recommended, remaining within the scope of the study: “So let a prince set about the task of conquering and maintaining his state; his methods will always be judged honorable and will be universally praised” (p. 101). In these constant and energetic precepts (*precetti*) there is all the didacticism of the genre but also an active stand by Machiavelli (and not the simple objective statement of the study).

Let us not turn away our eyes; let us admit that *The Prince* is a terrible book. But it is not terrible because its author was an immoral man. We easily recognize that, on the whole, common morality does not enter into it. “Everyone realizes how praiseworthy it is for a prince to honor his word and to be straightforward rather than crafty in his dealings; nonetheless, contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.” (p. 99)

It is well known that Machiavelli was the first to study politics as a domain in itself, independently of morality, and that this was his most sensible step forward in regard not only to the religiosity of the Middle Ages but also to the humanist syncretism of the Renaissance.

Paradoxically, this forward step of the Renaissance thinker toward a scientific study of politics was nonetheless based entirely on moral premises. They were not very comforting: men, always avid for something and always occupied in intriguing for that something, are not as a rule completely good or completely bad, but the bad is more often found and is more natural to them than the good. The sarcastic digressions of Machiavelli even lead his exegetes to see an original form of moralism in him: “When human perfidy and wickedness reach extreme limits it

becomes absolutely necessary for the world to rid itself of human beings by one of the three following means—plague, famine or flood: so that those few remaining, having suffered, can begin to live more decently and become better men” (II, 5). After such a statement, we should perhaps not go so far as to take the author of *The Prince* for a moralist. If such is the nature of man—and therein lies the problem—it is absurd to lament over it and admonish men. Machiavelli constantly repeats: “These means are very cruel and the enemies of all life, not just Christian but simply human; every man should avoid them and prefer to remain a simple citizen rather than become a king at the price of such human destruction; nevertheless, he who wishes to choose the right direction indicated and maintain power must have recourse to the bad” (I, 26). We must take politics the way they are in reality. Contemptuous of human nature, but not of virtue, Machiavelli did not intend to close his eyes to the one in favor of the other. There you have the world of politics, he says, and you have to win in that world, after having assured the peace and good fortune of Italy.

What is terrible about *The Prince* is not the immorality of its author but the problem he presents in it. I suspect those who refute it detest Machiavelli above all because it is difficult for them to contradict him. The “purely moral” position cuts a sorry figure here because it alters the heart of the problem and eludes the truth: in formulating a non-political answer the “moralist” does not conduct himself too morally. The problem is not to know which is better, moral greatness or political success, but to know how to reconcile the two—respect for principles and calculated action—because the question is not posed in terms of morality rejecting the sullied domain of political action, staying above politics, looking for humanity outside of politics, but in terms of morality in politics itself, where moreover it should be absolutely advantageous, that is, immoral by definition even when no dishonesty is involved. In this regard, a sublime failure is in no way better than a vile success and may at times cost millions of human lives; a carpenter who made chairs on which no one could sit would be a bad carpenter, even if he were honest and did not drink.

This is approximately what Machiavelli had in mind when

he wrote that it would be wonderful if a prince had only praiseworthy qualities: unfortunately, it is not possible to have them all or to keep them, “because human circumstances do not permit.” This is why “a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many others who are not virtuous. Therefore, if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous and to make use of this or not, according to need” (p. 91). Having come to this conclusion, Machiavelli does not hesitate to go all the way. In *Discourse on the First Decade of Livy* he condemns Baglioni, the tyrant of Perugia, for having allowed Pope Julius II, who had entered the city unarmed and without having the good sense to wait for his troops, to remove him from power, and for not having profited from the convenient and superb occasion to slay the Roman pontiff. For Machiavelli, the Perugia tyrant was not held back by his goodness of heart nor by his conscience, since he had seduced his own sister and had caused the deaths of several members of his family in his struggle for power: he had simply lacked the boldness for a truly grandiose undertaking for which “everyone would have admired his courage and [thanks to which] he would have been assured of immortality, because he would have been the first to show the prelates how little should be made of those who live and govern as they should, and he would have done something whose grandeur surpassed infamy and risk” (I, 27).

Obviously, Machiavelli was never forgiven for such reasoning nor even for his way of reasoning. Is there need to remind ourselves that Machiavelli’s views belong to the beginning of the 16th century and that if we want to reflect seriously and without moralizing rhetoric on the tragic logic of *The Prince* it does not mean that we must find Machiavelli’s *precetti* felicitous...? It would be pointless after five centuries to reproach Machiavelli for approving of political assassination in an epoch in which it was commonplace. It is much more important that we ourselves take up the challenge of truth that he established and that is still valid today: namely, that morality in politics is not a problem that can be solved by mechanically transferring to politics moral criteria that guide the individual in his private life. This would be too simple and is not realizable.

We will affirm, in order to avoid misunderstandings and to console those whose nerves cannot bear the reading of *The Prince*, that men who conduct themselves decently in whatever circumstances will also conduct themselves decently in political struggles. First, however, they must answer to their consciences not only for their own personal conduct but for the conduct of their associates, and this, not only insofar as concerns the immediate historical consequences but also as far as the indirect and distant consequences of those actions are concerned. Neither is it to be excluded that encountering the shock of the need to oppose the ferocious and hypocritical brutality of a totalitarian regime such men are forced to redefine exactly what it means for them to remain decent. Morality is born at the moment of choice, a choice that a man makes on his own responsibility and not by applying a ready-made paradigm. In politics and in history, the most important moral problem is, after all, for the individual to determine the limits of that responsibility.

The solutions proposed by Machiavelli cannot be accepted, but the problem remains. As long as it is a question of reconciling politics and morality, the rational motive and values, in one way or another the question of measure arises—and this is a concrete question (with the exception of obvious cases entailing absolute moral restraints). The practical solution of the problem involves a difficult, at times torturing, choice and an inflexible stand has little chance of making it easier. We know that men make this choice in relation to the form and level of society, that the stern dialectic of the ends and the means is rooted in the contradictions of historical development and that in the twentieth century, to the degree that the scale and structure of politics undergoes a radical change, in a true democracy guaranteeing the rights of the minority, freedom of information and political pluralism, “Machiavellism” becomes not only morally odious, not only extremely dangerous, but—and therein lies hope—archaic.

“Machiavellism,” but certainly not Niccolò Machiavelli. Any serious solution to the problem of the end and the means is found not behind *The Prince* but before it, in other words, it includes the genesis and initial discussion of the problem contained in the legendary treatise. Machiavelli remains one of our eternal interlocutors: he was neither philosopher nor artist, he



arose in that sphere of thought in which everything ages more quickly. But if we carefully consider the internal structure of his thought, we realize that he was after all both philosopher and artist, a “universal man,” like a goodly number of his contemporaries, not only because of the variety of his interest but because of his depth.

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But what a destiny! And how difficult it was to understand this writer who, however, expressed himself with more precision and simplicity and in bolder relief than any other of the thinkers who wrote in Italian! Posterity has made of his name a common noun. His fellow citizens in 1527 preferred to him as Second Chancellor a certain Francesco Taruggi... In 1549 the Florentine Giambattista Busini recalled him in this manner: “All without exception detested him because of *The Prince*. The rich thought it was his *Prince* that led the Duke to deprive them of their wealth; the poor, of all their liberty; the “*piagnoni*”<sup>15</sup> considered him a heretic; and respectable people thought him a bigger and more shameless scoundrel than they themselves were, so that everybody hated him.”<sup>16</sup>

But Francesco Guicciardini, perhaps the only man of historiography and political thought in Italy we can place, if not on the same level as Machiavelli, at least relatively close to him, wrote in 1521: “a man whose opinions are curiously different from the current, an inventor of new and unusual things.”

Four and a half centuries later, Machiavelli has lost nothing of these qualities.

<sup>15</sup> Fanatic partisans of Savonarola belonging to the lowest strata of society.

<sup>16</sup> Luigi Firpo, *op. cit.*, p. 18.