MACHIAVELLIAN STUDIES

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Ma sendo l'intenzione mia stata scrivere cosa
che sia utile a chi la intende...

I share in these pages some of the analyses, interpretations and pedagogical works I carried out on the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, in particular *The Prince*, between spring 2020 and summer 2024.

A sentence from Nietzsche had spurred me on: "But how could the German language – even in the prose of a Lessing – imitate Machiavelli's tempo – Machiavelli who, in his *Principe*, lets us breathe the fine, dry air of Florence? He cannot help presenting the most serious concerns in a boisterous *allegrissimo*, and is, perhaps, not without a malicious, artistic sense for the contrast he is risking: thoughts that are long, hard, tough, and dangerous, and a galloping tempo and the very best and most mischievous mood."(*Beyond Good and Evil*, The free spirit, §28, trans. by Horstmann & Norman)

It was my political involvement in the years 2015-2019 that then led me to this study: what rationality should be adopted in such a context? What does activism face when it comes up against the forces of the State? How can we distinguish between the intentions of some and the realities of others? How can we understand the inertia of systems and how can we transform them?

Finally, my interest was motivated by a family tradition of sorts: my maternal grandmother, born in Pistoia, was, like many Italians, passionate about the Renaissance and the *Divina Commedia*. At the time of the rise of Fascism, her father, who worked for the national railways, had been "transferred" to Venice in one of those government manoeuvres designed to break up the nuclei of Communist groups. The family's inclination towards Gramsci rather than Mussolini is no secret.

During the years 2020-2023, I worked on and taught *The Prince*, read and reread the Florentine's works, along with biographies and commentaries. I learnt Italian, travelled to Florence and so on. At the end of 2023, I decided to write down what had remained notes and audio recordings until then. And to make accessible the documents that have been invaluable to me in the course of my research.

My intention being, in the wake of Machiavelli, "to write something useful to those who hear it" (ch. XV), I propose a reading of *The Prince* that aims above all to create intelligibility.

In Histories, you will find some elements of context needed to any situated knowledge; in Concepts, a synthetic explanation of the method developed by Machiavelli; in Replies, a series of open discussions with my students, with writers on political philosophy and with the zeitgeist; and finally in Sources, texts by Machiavelli, but also on and around his work, a small portable library, articles, podcasts, videos, etc.

My thanks go to the students who studied with me over the years, first-rate accomplices who have learned about political philosophy by reading *The Prince*. My desire in teaching it has been to be able to prepare their minds for issues that I think we urgently need to confront. A world that in many ways is becoming harder, harsher and crueller by the day. A world that must not be left in the hands of the "great" predators and that will not survive a policy of *status quo*.

Lausanne, 11 August 2024.

Historical, cultural and social context

1. Historical background

Niccolò di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (1469-1527) was a Renaissance diplomat, philosopher, historian, writer and poet. He was born and died in Florence, and shared his city's destiny during the years of great change that were the Italian Wars.

Detail of a view of Florence circa 1490 (the star indicates the Machiavelli house) .[1]

Machiavelli's birth and death can be linked to two major events: in 1469, Lorenzo de' Medici, known as 'the Magnificent', became the *de facto* ruler of Florence, crowning his family's success in the then flourishing banking sector. The year 1527 remains famous for the sack of Rome by the armies of Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain.

Italy did not then exist as a sovereign, unified territory. Several city-states ruled over smaller towns and vast regions essential to their resources (in Italian, the *contado*), vying for territory and influence, and resisting attempts by foreigners to gain a foothold in the peninsula. A map of the powers of Europe in 1469 would show the Spanish kingdoms to the west (Castile and Aragon, soon to be united by marriage), the Kingdom of France to the north-west, the Holy Roman Empire to the north, and the Ottoman Empire to the east, a threat since the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Florence was at a crossroads of cultures, and of commercial and political appetites.

[1] Detail of the *Veduta della catena* (1887), by F. & R. Petrini. Link to the arts&culture google page.

Political map of Europe circa 1469 (the star indicates the city of Florence) .[2]

2. Cultures and beliefs in 15th-century Italy

Although Italy did not exist as a nation[3], the unification of the peninsula was achieved in the past by the Romans, a memory that was still very much alive. **Roman culture** is omnipresent: in buildings and ruins, in laws and customs, in religion, literature and philosophy. And, of course, the language: while people in different parts of Italy spoke various Italian dialects, mastery of Latin was compulsory for matters of state and religion, dividing society along educational/social lines.

The traces left by the Romans were so vivid that when a prince toyed with the idea of conquering the whole country, the idea of following in the footsteps of the Romans was never far off. But the question immediately arises: do they want to follow in the footsteps of the Roman *Republic* or the *Empire*? Since the Romans had experienced both forms of government and their consequences, Italians in the medieval and Renaissance periods took a position in relation to this heritage. The answer given is not simply relative to ambition, but stems from a sense of identity linked to local mentalities and political traditions.

A second key cultural factor in the development of the Italian Renaissance was the **power of the Catholic Church**, which once again had its seat – the Holy See – in the "Eternal City"[4]. From Rome, the

[2] "The history of Europe: year by year", Cottereau Youtube channel, 2018.

[3] The unification of Italy, known as the *Risorgimento*, took place in the second half of the 19th century and was completed in 1871 when the Papal States were taken out of the hands of the Church and Rome was designated as the capital of the Kingdom of Italy.

[4] From 1378 to 1417, a period known as the Great Western Schism, the Church was split in two, with two different popes, one living in Avignon (France), the other in Rome. The split stemmed from the decline in the power of the

popes managed and profited from vast territories known as the Papal States. But far more influential than this *temporal* power (≡ concerned with the world where humans live and die) was the *spiritual* power of the Church (≡ concerned with eternity and the Word of God). The Pope, as Christ's representative on Earth, had the power to forgive sinners, crown emperors and dissolve marriages, but also political or commercial contracts. He therefore not only played a part in the legitimacy of sovereigns, but also acted as an arbiter and, more often than not, a player in all power struggles. As the Great Western Schism showed, this power had not escaped the attention of the kings and princes of Europe, who tried not to let the Church get in the way of their own ambitions.

The fact remains that Christian beliefs, inspired by sacred texts and disseminated by cults and institutions, had a major influence on the people of the Renaissance and beyond: to live according to the Ten Commandments[5], to lead a virtuous life[6] and devoid of vices[7], and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, in the hope that God would grant them eternal life at Judgement Day.

A third cultural influence is that of the ancient world: the world before the Christian era. Although they were Christians, the people of the Italian Renaissance worshipped ancient gods from ancient Greece, Rome and elsewhere, to whom they entrusted not the salvation of their souls, but matters relating to material life and daily activities. An example of this custom is the belief in the Roman goddess *Fortuna* (identified with the Greek goddess *Tyche*), from whom derives the concept used and reinvented by Machiavelli. Fortuna was often depicted spinning a wheel, the movement of which determined the circumstances favourable or unfavourable to each individual's actions. For an enterprise to succeed, one needs to find the "right moment"; and conversely, the best-prepared enterprises can fail if the moment is not right. Blind to social status, Fortuna was also seen as an expression of cosmic justice.

Church: faced with social changes in European societies, Rome tried to seize temporal power (=possession of land, armies, etc.), an aspiration that was stopped by Philip IV, King of France, who had other interests. The latter decided to increase taxes on the French clergy, which the Church did not accept. Over the following decades, the conflict would lead to the election of a French pope, not because of disagreement over religion itself, but because of economic and political interests. The Church's temporal and spiritual powers whetted the appetites of all kings and princes. At the height of the crisis, Christianity experienced two or even three popes at the same time. The situation was finally resolved at the Council of Constance in 1414: the Church's institutions were internationalised and a single pope was elected, Martin V, who would be reinstated in Rome three years later.

[5] Also known as the *Decalogue*, the Ten Commandments are, in the Old Testament (which was originally the sacred text of the Hebrews before becoming the first book of the Christian Bible, followed by the New Testament), the ten laws given by God directly to Moses: [I am the Lord your God], 1. you shall have no other gods before me, 2. you shall not make for yourself any graven image, 3. you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, 4. you shall remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, 5. you shall honour your father and your mother, 6. you shall not make any graven image for yourself. you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, 4. you shall remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, 5. you shall honour your father and your mother, 6. you shall not commit murder, 7. you shall not commit adultery, 8. you shall not steal, 9. you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour, 10. you shall not covet your neighbour, you shall not commit adultery.

[6] The four cardinal virtues, inspired by Plato's *Republic* and incorporated into Christian morality by Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo, are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Catholics have added the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity.

[7] The seven deadly sins, which date back to the Desert Fathers (a group of Christian hermits who lived from the 3rd to 4th centuries AD), are: pride, greed, anger, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth.

The Wheel of Fortune was closely linked to **astrology**, inherited from the Chaldeans and Egyptians. Indeed, astrology was considered to be the science of timing: an attempt to make sense of the world by observing the cyclical movements of the stars. If we look at the tensions that existed between the different beliefs of the time, we can see that astrology may have been both a means of counteracting the transcendence of the Christian faith (God is omnipotent and decides upon everything, whereas the stars have an influence that can be overcome) and of mitigating its internal contradictions (God is absolute good and cannot be held responsible for evil in this world, whereas the stars can be). Nevertheless, it was in practical life that astrology found its main use, which explains why monarchs and members of the nobility – as well as many popes – had their own private astrologer. In this respect, it is essential to note that astrology goes beyond superstition. Not only because many of the astronomers of the time, such as Johannes Kepler, were also astrologers, but because astrology offered a vision of a world in which, following the teachings of the Ancients, events could be anticipated, thus stabilising the unpredictability of fate within such a matrix[8].

Fortuna, blindfolded, spins the wheel.

Finally, **Greek philosophies** made a major comeback on the European cultural scene from the 11ème century onwards. Thanks to the Arab-Muslim world and its brilliant translators and philosophers, the Greek tradition was not lost with the fall of the Roman Empire. Through this route, many texts, ideas and techniques, as well as new discoveries, gradually penetrated Europe (take the example of Arabic numerals[9] , and in particular 0, which the Arabs had borrowed from the Indians and which the Greeks did not know). As a result of the Christian Crusades (which ended towards the end of the 13th century) and the Muslim states of the Iberian Peninsula (known as Al-Andalus until the end of the 15th century), the two cultures had several opportunities to meet. But rivalry was intense, and Christians

[8] Image taken from : Jehan Boccaccio (Giovanni Boccaccio), *Le Livre des Cas des nobles hommes*, published between 1401 and 1500. Gallica.

[9] The Pisan merchant and mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci was one of the first Europeans to use Arabic numerals, following his travels in 1198.

often rejected knowledge from Muslims because the latter did not share their beliefs. In time, however, Aristotle's writings were read again in Europe.

Plato's dialogues reached Italy by another route, the one that linked Venice to the Byzantine Empire. Through diplomatic missions or commercial journeys, the Italians brought back the first scrolls of Plato's texts, scrolls that remained illegible because knowledge of the Greek language had meanwhile been lost in the peninsula. Italy had to wait until Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in 1453 for the Byzantine scholars capable of teaching it to emigrate westwards. Probably the most famous Italian translator of the Renaissance, Marsilio Ficino made all of Plato's works accessible to Latin readers, as well as several treatises by the Neo-Platonists and the Hermetic tradition. With the help of Cosimo de' Medici, he founded a new Academy in Florence, modelled on the one that Plato had created in Athens. Ficino was also Lorenzo de' Medici's tutor.

3. Social change and power struggles

Since the time of the Crusades, another social class has gradually become the driving force behind the changes to come: merchants. Increasingly globalised thanks to new land and sea routes, they quickly became irreplaceable.

In the Middle East, the Venetians had trading posts in Alexandria, Baghdad and Jerusalem since the 11th century, but they lost them during the Arab conquest which ended with the siege of Acre in 1291. In the east, the Genoese and Venetians established trading posts as far as the Black Sea, and new land routes were opened up to the Far East. In the west, sea and land routes soon enabled merchants and bankers from Venice, Genoa, Pisa, Milan, Florence and other smaller towns to do business in France, Germany, Spain, Flanders, England and Scotland. All this commercial activity facilitated the transmission of information, opinions and stories, and, as mentioned above, of knowledge and techniques. The same was true of viruses: one hypothesis is that the bubonic plague – also known as the Black Death – arrived in Europe via the Silk Road and then spread rapidly across the continent following the trade routes. The epidemic peaked in Europe between 1347 and 1351, killing between 30% and 60% of the entire European population.

For merchants, doing business abroad always involved major risks: losing a ship and its precious cargo at sea, or being robbed on the way home. This was how nascent capitalism developed: to share the costs of these expeditions, insurance policies and joint ventures were invented. To reinforce this system, new currencies were created in the second half of the 13th century, first in Florence (the gold florin) and Genoa, then in Milan and Venice, which soon became the reference currencies throughout Europe. The Italian bankers[10] prospered rapidly and opened branches in other countries, soon lending money to kings, princes, dukes and popes, to fuel their wars. Bankers also lent money to each other and/or competed with each other. They were intensely involved in public life, driven by their personal

[10] The word "bank" comes from the Italian *banca*, meaning bench: benches were used as improvised offices and exchange counters by Florence's bankers at the time.

ambitions and served in this way by a family-centred organisation (cf. the Medici in Florence, the Fuggers in Bavaria).

Political map of the Italian peninsula in 1499 .[11]

Let us take closer look at just how closely intertwined the various city-states in the north of the peninsula were. On the map above, showing the areas of political influence in 1499 (a year after Machiavelli became Secretary of the Second Chancellery of the Republic of Florence), we can see the importance of the Republic of Venice to the east, the Duchy of Milan to the north, the small Republic of Siena and the Papal States to the south, and the Kingdom of Naples, in the hands of the Kingdom of Aragon, to the south.

Thanks to the wealth generated by trade and banking, Italian city-states grew and gained in autonomy. The early 13th century saw the emergence of **communes**, independent towns governed locally and reigning over an area of political and economic power known as a *contado*. As they grew and became more powerful, some became republics (generally governed by various councils to which a variable proportion of the wealthiest members of the population had access), while others became principalities, in a complex interplay of power between the nobility, the papacy, the rising merchant class and the people.

[11] Wikimedia commons, 11.8.2024.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, borders were constantly changing and were never physically marked, except by natural elements (rivers, mountains, etc.). A vassal city could become independent of its lord in the aftermath of a period of unrest. Take the example of Pisa, an important city in Machiavelli's life: Pisa had fallen into the hands of Florence in 1406, but regained its independence in 1494, when the King of France, Charles VIII, crossed its territory to invade the Kingdom of Naples. This independence was short-lived, however, as the Florentines recaptured Pisa in 1509 (with the militia that Machiavelli had organised). This was not just a question of prestige or resources: Pisa was synonymous with access to the sea and, whereas Florentine merchants had been forced to pay for the services of Venetian or Genoese shipowners, with Pisa they could develop their own fleet.

As Machiavelli wrote, every city-state wanted to "maintain" itself and, for that reason, in seeking its own expansion, also sought to ensure that the others did not become too powerful. What the Italian city-states were looking for in the 15th and 16th centuries was a sophisticated balance of power across the peninsula that would work to their advantage. This would happen temporarily around Florence during the years of Lorenzo de'Medici's reign. His grandfather, Cosimo the Elder, had been the architect of this fragile balance, using financial and political means to create a complex situation of alliances and debts[12]. However, when Lorenzo died in 1492, the balance was upset and the arrival of Charles VIII in 1494 marked the start of the period of conflict known as the Italian Wars, which lasted until 1559.

4. The Florentine Renaissance

The term used to describe the period from the end of the 14th century to the end of the 16th century, "the Renaissance" (Italian: *il Rinascimento*), raises many questions. Why was it (as translated from the French) *a rebirth*, and for whom? How did we come to call it that?

The Renaissance is usually considered as a bridge between the medieval and modern periods; but it is clear that the medieval period can in turn be seen as a bridge between Late Antiquity and the Renaissance, just as the so-called modern period will one day be seen as a bridge with what follows.

The Renaissance has also been called the end of the Dark Ages. The latter expression was coined by Francesco Petrarca, a Florentine poet and scholar of the 14th century, who wanted to unite his own Christian culture with the heritage of Roman civilisation, the greatest that had ever existed in his eyes: wasn't this age "dark" precisely because Petrarca criticised it and wanted change? The "Dark Ages" notion was still popularised by historians in the 19th century (at a time when Italy's project for national unity was in a critical phase), but has been fought against ever since. While it is true that most of the philosophical, artistic and literary works of the Greeks and Romans were "lost" to the countries of Western Europe after the sack of Rome in 410, the writings of Aristotle and many Muslim scientists and philosophers reached Italy and other European countries well before the 14th century.

The image of "ten centuries of ruins and superstition" ends up being nothing else than a cliché. From the 12th century onwards, in the newly created universities (Bologna in 1088, Paris in 1150, Oxford

[12] Surprisingly, Machiavelli did not analyse this issue at all in *The Prince*. When, for example, the Medici bank lent money to Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan from 1460 to 1476, it acquired decisive power over the prince and his city; or when a powerful banker lent money to his own city and was elected to government shortly afterwards.

in 1167), scholastic philosophy[13] developed and reached its apogee in the 13th and 14th centuries. Gothic art appeared at the end of the 12th century and flourished throughout Europe until the end of the 15th. So **what changed** between these two "eras"? What changed between Gothic art, where the dominant affects were linked to piety, fear and hope, and Renaissance art, from the middle of the 15th century onwards in Florence, where beauty, freedom and harmony became dominant in both the arts and philosophy? The quick answer is: Plato replaced Aristotle, merchants took the place of priests, and the relationship between God and human beings was reversed in favour of the latter.

The development of **humanism** (a term coined at the end of the 18th to express the idea that knowledge should begin with humans and the human sciences, rather than with God and theology) is at least as old as Protagoras, famous for his sentence "human is the measure of all things". Yet what took place as early as the 13th century, in Florence[14], was a fundamental change in the Christian mentality, in the relationship between humans and God, in particular through a change in the relationship between men and women. When Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), author of the *Divina Commedia*, made the woman he loved an intercessor between himself and the divine, he sublimated human love and created new values. Picking up on this gesture, as well as on Dante's style of writing – the *Dolce stil novo* – Petrarca (1304-1374) wrote his *Canzoniere* for the woman he loved, before embarking on a long quest to find lost manuscripts from Greek and Roman antiquity. Just as Dante had chosen Virgil as his guide in the circles of the afterlife, Petrarca wanted to return to antiquity. It was both a return to values centered on human relationships, and an attempt to distance himself from the rigidity of Christianity in order to open up a new area of thought.[15]

Since Dante's attitude towards **human love as a path to the divine** was similar to Plato's (for example, in *Phaedrus* or *The Symposium*), when the latter's dialogues were rediscovered by Byzantine scholars in the mid-1500s the association of these two traditions – Christian humanism and Platonism – became somewhat inevitable. Of course, in Plato, it is not the love of women but the love of men that is considered "divine madness", but Florentine society – nurtured by the spirit of the Commune and its love of freedom – was known for its permissiveness towards male homosexuality. On the other hand, the Christian figures of the New Testament (Mary and Mary Magdalene in particular) allowed women to

[13] Combining Aristotelian and Christian texts and influences, the best-known figures of Scholasticism are Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Duns Scotus (1265-1308) and William of Ockham (1287-1347).

[14] The fact that these events took place in Florence is significant in another respect: the special attention the city paid to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to the Annunciation, the biblical story of how the archangel Gabriel came to tell Mary that she was carrying the son of God in her womb. Not only was the first day of the Florentine calendar set for 25 March, the day of the Annunciation, but representations of this scene could be seen all over the city. In the 15th century, when Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) theorised the conical perspective, the tradition of painting the Annunciations entered a new and rich period, and with it a questioning of the place occupied by Mary, the major female figure in the Christian mindset. And beyond this question, there is another, called the mystery of the Incarnation: how could God become man, in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ? The synthesis of the human and the divine, while an essential element of the Christian faith, suddenly seemed more important than the fear of the Last Judgement.

[15] Several other poets and scholars took part in this movement. Let us mention two of them. Guido Cavalcanti (1258-1300), a close friend of Dante, wrote poems inspired by courtly love that Cavalcanti integrated into the more popular, urban world of the Tuscan commune. Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), who corresponded with Petrarca, is famous for his *Decameron*, a collection of 100 tales told by a group of seven young women and three young men who took refuge in a villa outside Florence at the time of the Black Death. An essential element of the change they brought about was that Dante, Cavalcanti, Petrarca and Boccaccio all wrote in the Tuscan vernacular rather than Latin, transforming the relationship of the people to literature and greatly favouring the formation of the Italian language spoken today.

be valued in a very different way to what had happened in Greece. Society was still patriarchal, but the cultural orientation had changed. If an idealised woman (rather than a real woman) could take the place previously held by priests and angels and act as a bridge to the divine, it also could mean that life here on earth was increasingly becoming part of the spiritual life.

Let's go back to the word "Renaissance". In 1569, as the Medici were preparing to become Grand Dukes of Tuscany, a man in their service, Gorgio Vasari, coined the word **Rinascita** in his book *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*. The book by Vasari, himself a painter and architect, has since been regarded as one of the first Art History opuses. Yet in this context, when Vasari called for the rebirth of ancient culture and virtues *in Florence*, it was of course a political act in support of the city's then undisputed masters. The "Renaissance" can therefore be understood as the coming to power of the new merchant class, the banking class, which was ostentatiously generous towards the arts and culture because it could use them to support and contribute to its own ideology, make its mark on the world and be recognised by future generations for such achievements.

By becoming a **patron of the arts**, sponsoring the painters Fra Angelico, Fra Filippo Lippi and Donatello, the architects Michelozzo Michelozzi and Filippo Brunelleschi, the Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino, financing the completion of the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, and building churches, convents and libraries, Cosimo the Elder united his prestige and personal success with those of Florence.

It was his grandson, Lorenzo, who gave full rein to this policy. But in his wake, "magnificence" declined, partly due to poor management of state finances, demonstrating the extent to which the Renaissance was also linked to conditions of peace and prosperity.

Niccolò Machiavelli was born at the beginning of the "reign" of Lorenzo de'Medici, into an old Florentine family, but poor and without status. His father, a doctor of law, gave him a humanist education. Machiavelli benefited from the atmosphere of the Renaissance... And throughout his life, he followed the ups and downs of life in Florence, its outbursts, its downfalls and its disasters.

Key concepts in *The Prince*

Introduction

To grasp the purpose of The *Prince*, written between 1512 and 1513, we should remember that the original title was not written in Italian, like the rest of the book, but in Latin: *De Principatibus*, i.e. *On the Principate*. The Italian title under which the work became known, *Il Principe*, was given to it in 1532 by its first printer[16] . But this title could be misleading, because the subject of Machiavelli's work is not primarily the office of prince, but the political form of the principate. He makes this clear in Chapter II: "I will leave aside the discussion of republics, because I have discussed them at length on another occasion. I will turn only to the principate, [...] and I will discuss how these principates can be governed and maintained."[17] Moving from the singular to the plural, Machiavelli indicates that the principate unfolds in different forms, the specifics of which will be assessed. What unites them is that they have a prince at their head; but a prince is not enough to make a principate, since other functions are necessary to govern and maintain this political form.

Three parts can be identified in the book: from Chapters I to XI, Machiavelli deals with the different institutional forms of the principate; from Chapters XII to XIV, with armies; and from Chapters XV to XXV, with the princely function. The Dedicatory letter and chapter XXVI, which closes the work, play a special role, the former putting the whole work into perspective, the latter giving it a purpose: Machiavelli calls for a prince to unify Italy, which was then divided into many states.

Was he in favour of this political form? Did he think it was the best? Everything would suggest so if we were to only read *The Prince*. In the passage quoted above, however, Machiavelli refers to another of his works: the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*[18] in which he discusses the republic, a political form in which power is exercised not by a prince but by the people or their representatives. It is clear from this book that Machiavelli's sympathies lay with the republic rather than the principate, partly because the republic is based on the freedom of the people, and partly because it is a more stable form of government, since it does not have to fear being destroyed by a single act of cutting off its head. However, his most famous and most widely read work is not the *Discourses*, but this concise and direct work: *The Prince*. Why is this so?[19]

Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* following the fall of the Republic of Florence, in whose government he participated from 1498 to 1512 as Secretary to the Second Chancellery, the equivalent of a head of diplomacy. It was the experience he gained during these fifteen years that led him to write The *Prince*.

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[16] A Roman publisher, Antonio Blado. Read the article by Raffaele Ruggiero, Les premières phases de la transmission du Prince de Machiavel.

[17] All quotations from The *Prince* are taken from the translation by Peter Bondanella, Oxford World Classics, 2005.

[18] Which he began writing at the same time as *The Prince* and finished in 1517.

[19] This is not a necessary historical progression, since while Italy was unified in 1861 in the form of a monarchy, and then transformed into a republic in 1946, the republic of ancient Rome underwent the opposite fate, becoming an empire. Indeed, we might be tempted to draw a parallel with the evolution of Machiavelli's thought, who began by urging the unification of Italy in the form of a principate, then, in 1517, argued decisively in favour of a republic. Rather, we need to take up this question again, starting from the notion of *qualità dei tempi*: different times, different situations, call for different forms of government, those that are capable of "governing and maintaining" a society as a whole.

So what can a man who worked in the service of a republic teach us about principates? Why write such a book? Because he had met many princes and negotiated with their governments; because he had closely observed this political form, which he did not want to come back to power... and which nevertheless did, in 1512, under the guise of Lorenzo II de' Medici, aided on this occasion by Pope Julius II, whose bankers were the Medici. If Machiavelli addresses *The Prince* to a Medici, and if he ends his book with an exhortation to unify Italy under a princely power, it must be seen as an opportunity to return to a job in the service of the city-state, to continue doing what he knows best. It also reflects the fact that, for him, pragmatism takes precedence over ideology. Machiavelli does not believe in perfect government: some governments are better than others, and this is decided more by circumstances than by morality. So it is the *form* he gave birth to in these circumstances, the *way* he seized the opportunity, that will interest us here, since that is where the meaning of this work lies.

The reception of the book over the following centuries is exemplary in this respect. It can be divided into three currents. The first two are diametrically opposed: one interprets *The Prince* as a manual for becoming a tyrant; the second as a lesson given to peoples to guard against tyrants, to get to know them better so as to better survive them[20]. Should we decide who is right and who is wrong? The existence of these two currents at least offers proof that the book was read by monarchs and dictators as well as republicans and revolutionaries, each finding food for thought in it. Hence, too, the existence of a third current, which consists of not taking an a priori position, in order to bring out the effort of intelligence to which the work bears witness: to understand how the political forces interpret this book, each in its own way, to understand what politics is, this *arte dello stato* that deals with the common life of human beings through the intermediary of the State.

Through his discussions of political forms, Machiavelli thinks the human being. He shows, gives examples, argues and reasons *about us*. And we hardly seem certain of what we are, let alone what we want, no matter how many big words we use to make believe otherwise; it is a sign of probity in this respect that he treats the great concepts of tradition in what I would call a *quasi-metaphysics*. Machiavelli avoids value judgements – that's his realism – he doesn't say that human beings are good by nature or bad by nature, he doesn't say that one political form is a priori better than another. What he does say is that circumstances (la *fortuna*) and action (la *virtù*) must be taken into account, judging not according to moral values but according to the result. What happens, once it has happened, takes on the force of necessity, history being always in motion and its end never set.

Machiavelli's book has been much talked about because, as Jean Giono wrote, he "gave the game away of all mankind".[21] While everyone likes to know what goes on behind the scenes and the secret workings of power – so as not to be fooled by sleight of hand, but also to know how to play it themselves – everyone fears the man who gives the game away, and hates him, because he tells everyone how to do it. A magician whose tricks were revealed to the public would lose his prestige: therefore, shouldn't we interpret *The Prince* as an operation to undermine the princely function? The problem is that every human being thinks they are magician... that every individual, even in the privacy of their own head, judges according to his own usefulness and wants to be a prince in their own kingdom.

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[20] "In the 18th century, Diderot favoured the first solution: Machiavelli teaches the powerful "a detestable kind of politics that can be summed up in two words, the art of tyrannising". But Rousseau replied in *The Social Contract*: "This man teaches tyrants nothing; they know only too well what they have to do, but he instructs the people in what they have to fear." " Patrick Boucheron, *Un été avec Machiavelli*, ed. des Equateurs, 2017, pp. 54-55.

[21] In his Preface to *Toutes les lettres de Machiavelli*, t.1, Gallimard, Paris, 1955, p. XI.

Why, we asked, is *The Prince* Machiavelli's most widely read work? Firstly, because of the book's philosophical and literary qualities. Secondly, because it's always an advantage to know the tricks, whatever side of power you're on. Thirdly, because the figure of the prince, whose will is to live and prosper, addresses every human being's struggle with circumstances.

With the fall of the Republic in 1512, Machiavelli lost everything. With *The Prince*, he rises again and casts his gaze across the crossroads.

1. *Effectual truth*

Let us begin by quoting at length from chapter XV of The *Prince*: " Now, it remains to be considered what should be the methods and principles of a prince in dealing with his subjects and allies. Because I know that many have written about this, I am afraid that by writing about it again I shall be considered presumptuous, especially since in discussing this material I depart from the procedures of others. But since my intention is to write something useful for anyone who understands it, it seemed more suitable for me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one [*mi è parso più conveniente andare drieto a la verità effetuale de la cosa che alle immaginazione di epsa*]. Many writers have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality. For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation."

Machiavelli contrasts two ways of approaching the political question. The one from which he departs consists in talking not about things themselves but about the image of things, i.e. the idea we have of them, the idea of what they *should* be. This normative and idealistic approach is typical of Plato and the Platonic tradition, for whom good politics depends on good laws and good models, which are discovered through dialectical reflection. It is also the approach taken by the numerous works of the Middle Ages known as the *mirrors of princes*: manuals for rulers, combining Christian doctrine with political precepts inspired by Greco-Roman antiquity. If Machiavelli takes a different path, it is because these cities, which were to be organised according to rational laws and/or moral rules, have always remained projects (= we have never seen them produce the concrete results they promised) and imaginations (= we have never known what we were actually talking about when we spoke of them, a way of saying that the only relevant knowledge comes from what experience teaches us).

Machiavelli proposes a different approach. His intention being "to write something useful for anyone who understands it ", he potentially addresses every human being, rulers and commoners alike, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. To read Machiavelli, all you need is the desire to understand what someone else is saying, by relating it to your own issues and reflecting on it in the light of your own experience. On this point, too, he differs from Plato, for whom philosophy was primarily addressed to philosophers, who had a function in society: thinking rightly should enable them to enact just laws[22]; and it is by understanding, applying and obeying these laws that the rest of the population can contribute

[22] Cf. the functional tripartition of the ideal city in *The Republic*, headed by the philosopher-kings.

to justice in the city. Machiavelli's intention, therefore, unlike Plato, does not establish a social hierarchy for the ability to understand or to be politically active.[23]

The key here is utility: I understand because I have a motivation to understand, an interest, so my understanding is necessarily linked to my experience and my position in the social body. This approach is echoed in the Dedicatory letter, where Machiavelli writes that he learned everything from "a long experience in modern affairs", i.e. from his years in the service of the Republic of Florence, and from "a continuous study of antiquity", i.e. from reading the texts of historians, statesmen and philosophers of the past, which enabled him to find points of comparison and concepts for understanding political action. Machiavelli does not propose a doctrine or recipes, but a method, i.e. a way of proceeding.

What is this method? It consists of "search after the effectual truth of the matter", in other words, grasping the effects of the actions undertaken and drawing lessons from them that can be used to guide future actions. At a first level, Machiavelli's philosophy is therefore *knowledge through effects*: effectual truth is that which is followed by effects and which can be understood through its effects. It is through the effects it produces that we can understand the action as appropriate or inappropriate to the goal to be achieved, the only truth that counts in politics being that which leads to concrete results. From here, we can move on to a second level, which consists in understanding effectual truth as the intellective deployment of nature in the act[24], which is inseparable from the effects produced by the preceding circumstantial totality. In the specific case of political action, uncovering effectual truth means knowing the rules for acquiring and preserving the political set of relationships, whatever this set may be; in the case of a principate, the political relationships that constitute it (cf. point 3 below).

It is interesting to note the debate surrounding the expression "*andare drieto*". One very common translation renders it as "going straight to", finding confirmation in Machiavelli's direct style[25]. However, it is possible to understand the expression more as "search after", "following", or even as "in the wake of" (as in “in the wake of a ship”)[26]. Events happen (e.g. a prince takes a decision, changes a law, a people revolts, an invasion takes place, etc.) and it is by positioning oneself in the wake of such events that we can best grasp their content and scope, measuring their direct and indirect consequences[27]. Machiavelli would thus emphasise that what we are able to understand about an event is determined by two things:

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[23] Machiavelli does not, however, believe that everyone can understand him, since in Chapter XXII, addressing the question of the choice of ministers, he makes a distinction between three types of intelligence: " There are three kinds of intelligence: one understands on its own; the second discerns what others understand; and the third neither understands by itself nor through others. The first kind is most excellent, the second is excellent, and the third is useless."

[24] In this respect, Machiavelli is an heir to Lucretius, and perhaps to Dante's *Monarchy*.

[25] As Machiavelli wrote in the Dedicatory letter: " I have neither decorated nor filled this work with elaborate sentences, with rich and magnificent words, or with any other form of rhetorical or unnecessary ornamentation that many writers normally use in describing and enriching their subject-matter, for I wished that nothing should set my work apart or make it pleasing except the variety of its material and the gravity of its contents."

[26] See under "drieto" in *Il Terentio latino, commentato in lingua toscana, e ridotto alla sua vera latinità*, by Giovanni Fabrini, Venezia, 1594.

[27] This way of understanding the expression "*andare drieto*" can be linked to the notion of event, "*evento*", developed in chapter XVIII. There, an event is defined as something that has happened, something that has taken place: it can no longer be undone. In fact, only human beings who have lived through an event will consider it to be an event, in the strongest sense of the term, because they will have lived through its direct consequences and the way in which, among themselves, they will have talked about it and positioned themselves in relation to what happened.

our position in the situation, and our ability to link what has happened to our personal experience and to human experience in the broadest sense.

This, in any case, is Machiavelli's method. It requires the person who applies it to be *in the midst of*, in the action, taking part in it (and not outside the action, in the external position of observer, moral judge or theorist). As we shall see, knowledge through effects is only possible if the subject who forms it is exposed to the effects of what he is seeking to know, and it gains in relevance insofar as it resonates with other knowledges of the same kind, is confronted in action, putting its effectiveness to the test of reality.

2. Positional dynamics

Let's go back to the beginning of the book. In the Dedicatory letter to Lorenzo II de' Medici, Machiavelli sets up a locutionary strategy that I will call *positional dynamics*. Where does he place himself, where is he, as author, as person? Is he in a position of servitude to the prince, when he calls him "Your Magnificence", or is he in the position of the master who teaches, the man of experience who challenges the young prince? He remains elusive as he passes through each of the squares on the chessboard, and from each, banking on the ambiguity of meaning, brings his interlocutor to the place he himself occupied the moment before.

This dynamic is illustrated by the painter's allegory: "For just as those who paint landscapes place themselves in a low position on the plain in order to consider the nature of the mountains and the heights, and place themselves high on top of mountains in order to study the plains, in like manner, to know the nature of the people well one must be a prince, and to know the nature of princes well one must be of the people." Note in passing that it is not just a question of knowing but of knowing *well* [*a conoscere bene*], i.e. knowing with a view to a goal that is none other than political utility.

The allegory of the painter will give us a better understanding of the method of effectual truth. To paint a mountain well, the painter must place himself where the mountain will have the greatest effect on him, i.e. on the plain, the plain as it identifies itself as a plain because it is dominated by the mountain; if, on the other hand, he wants to paint the plain, the painter will have to place himself on the mountain, in order to see the whole plain open up before him, and grasp the extent to which the mountain depends on the plain in order to exist as a mountain. It is therefore a question of applying knowledge through effects, knowledge that is necessarily conditioned by the position of the subject. A particular mountain will not show the same face depending on whether you stand to the north or east of its slopes, will not produce the same shadow on the landscape depending on its size and the season, and so on. Similarly, a given plain will look different if viewed from the plain itself, where visibility is limited, or from a hill, a mountain, a plane, a satellite, etc. The subject's position, his point of view, is both the source and the limit of the knowledge he can form of the world around him.

The method of effectual truth is therefore a perspectivist method, as we already found traces of in Alberti's theory[28] (when he calls the frame of the painting "an open window through which to look at the story"), and which we will see developed in other ways, for example in Leibniz (his monadology), Nietzsche (the will to truth understood as the will to power) or again in Donna Haraway (situated

[28] In *De Pictura*, written in 1435.

knowledge). What is special about Machiavelli is the vis-à-vis: from the outset there are at least two subjects, the plain and the mountain, the people and the prince. These two subjects look at each other, so that the ability of one to know is conditioned by that of the other.

Moving from the allegory to the real situation, Machiavelli concludes that only princes can know the nature of peoples, and only peoples can know the nature of princes. Heteronomy is a necessary condition of knowledge (you have to be different from the prince to know the prince), but this exteriority must also be *affected* by what it wants to know (you have to be part of the people governed by the prince to know the prince). Machiavelli uses indefinite articles here to ensure a rise in generality, but this should not obscure the fact that, according to his method, only a knowledge of the particular is possible: only the prince of this people can know the nature of this people, and vice versa.

"Useful to anyone who understands it", this knowledge is therefore necessarily ambiguous, as it can be used in both senses. The same thing will be true in two different senses depending on whether it is used by the people or by the prince; and these two senses will be mutually enriched as they move from one position to the other. To use the terms of the allegory, we could say that you can only know the plain well if you know it from the mountain, but you need to be able to listen to someone living on the plain in order to understand how the way the mountain faces the plain conditions the knowledge that the mountain can have of the plain. Machiavelli's method is therefore consistent with his invitation to the prince who reads it to choose *him*, a man of the people, as his advisor: as a man of the people, he is a useful advisor precisely because he enables this dynamic interplay of views, where knowledge through effects unfolds its full potential. To have as advisors only people accustomed to positions of leadership (whether political or economic) would be to deprive yourself of the knowledge produced by otherness.

This is all the more true given that each prince, and each people, have changing natures: so much so that our knowledge of them must be constantly updated and re-evaluated as circumstances and events dictate. There is always a tension between the usefulness for some and the usefulness for others, and therefore also between the knowledge that each can form of it.

3. The nature of princes, the nature of peoples

What is a prince? In Machiavelli, the term is not limited to royal bloodlines, nobility, dynasty, monarchy or aristocracy, but refers to any person or group of people in a position of leadership. This extension allows us to read *The Prince* with reference to a president, company director, commander of a crew or armed forces, charismatic or religious leader, or a government made up of several people. Conceptually, the prince is the dominant position, i.e. the one in which the strongest power to act is manifested within a given social body.

From such a definition, we also understand that any ruler effectively ceases to be a *prince* from the moment another part of the social body becomes the holder of the greatest power to act: the ruler may well have a crown on his head, but if he does not have the greatest power to act he is no longer truly a prince. Conversely, Lorenzo de' Medici, for example, is said to have been the *de facto* prince of Florence ("de facto", not "de jure"), meaning that although he had no title of nobility to claim, nor was he elected, he occupied the *position of* prince in Florence between 1469 and 1492, thanks to the power of his family, his resources, his influence and his own qualities. The effects of this were clear for all to see.

How do we know a prince? As we have said, every prince is necessarily a prince of a people, because his power exists only insofar as it is exercised over a people. As a member of the people, we can get to know the prince through the effects his power has on us. First, these effects can be seen in the acceptance or rejection that a people shows towards him. Machiavelli uses a number of affects (love, fear and hatred) to assess the bond between a group and its ruler. Second, the effects produced by a prince can be seen in the way in which his decisions impact on the lives of a people: a people will feel them and interpret them either as for the better (improved living conditions and a feeling of freedom) or as for the worse (deterioration in living conditions and a feeling of oppression). In the case of a political leader – or, more broadly, a government – such decisions typically manifest themselves in the creation or repeal of laws, taxes, subsidies, administrative rules, etc.; they also manifest themselves in the creation or repeal of laws, taxes, subsidies, administrative rules, etc.; they also manifest themselves in external relations, diplomacy, geopolitical and trade relations, and open or latent conflicts with other powers, all of which have a direct and indirect impact on the lives of the people in the short, medium and long term.

What is a people? Just as it has been said that a prince is only a prince as long as he has the greatest power to act within a given social body, a people is only a people as long as its members recognise themselves as belonging to the same community. Once again, we need to think in terms of effectual truth: a people is a group of people who produce certain effects on each other that hold them together. So it's not a question of numbers, but of a way of life, and intersubjectivity.

In the opening chapters of *The Prince*, Machiavelli focuses on three elements: language, customs and institutions. These are all ways of living that, carried on through time, produce the identity of a people, that is to say, the inter-recognition of its members as belonging to the same *effectual community*: they speak the same language or languages, they share the same everyday life, they evolve within the same social canvas. Whether we actively participate in it or suffer its effects, a group of human beings constitutes a people as long as they are caught up in the same story.

In addition to language, customs and institutions, let's talk briefly about place, city or country. The desire to protect, develop and embellish the place where they live and the way they live there is what makes a people. And while existing in a place is a necessary condition for human life, there can be no people if that existence is not continued through time. In his *Florentine Histories* (1525), Machiavelli depicts the social movements that have shaken the city of Florence over the centuries: the different guilds of merchants, craftsmen and bankers, each with their own interests; the alliances and conflicts between the great families, and with neighbouring cities such as Siena, Prato, Pistoia and Milan. We hear the author's pride in his city and his love of freedom. All this, which makes up the *history* of Florence, helps us to understand that a people never exists a priori or once and for all. They *develop*. If a prince wants to be able to govern them, the knowledge he can acquire of them as an effectual community is of the utmost importance.

4. *Il populo e i grandi*

To understand the complexity of the relationship between the prince and the people, particularly during the Renaissance but not only, two additional elements need to be taken into account: the division of the social body between the people and the greats, and the role played by religion.

People brought together in a social body are never equal *de facto* (they can be equal *de jure*, i.e. equal in rights/before the law, at least in theory), because each person is born with different abilities, into a different family, etc. This inequality of each human life is reinforced by certain social norms, whether it be the right of inheritance, laws relating to property, or the distribution of power between men and women, citizens and foreigners, etc. It is something Machiavelli addresses when he uses the metaphor of the *body* to describe society.

Let us return briefly to this idea. In chapter III, Machiavelli writes that when new states are added to an old state, the prince must ensure that "they will become one body with the old principality" ("*diventa con loro il principato antiquo tutto uno corpo*"). The expression "*one [whole] body"* clearly indicates the idea of integration, which Machiavelli believed should be achieved organically, by doing away with the previous prince and his lineage, so that the new *head* would be better accepted, and without immediately changing the laws and taxes, so that the change of *head* could take place under stable conditions. If, on the other hand, an acquired state "presents dissimilarities" in language, customs and institutions, he recommends that the prince either go and live there, in order to have the new *head* recognised (through love and fear), or send colonies there that will act as "shackles" on that state. Finally, it is necessary, he writes, either to annihilate or to flatter, so as not to have to fear vengeance on the one hand, and on the other to get members of this State on one's side (dignitaries, merchants, corporations, populations, etc.). Let's synthetise by saying that blood is the key element here: it has to be spilled *well*, but it also has to be circulated *well*, "well" here being relative to the prince's aim (to govern and maintain). Don't spill blood for nothing; if you must kill, do it in a decisive manner; hinder the flow of blood so that it doesn't feed certain organs that you want to eliminate; let it circulate so that it continues to feed the social body; redirect it into the new institutions that you want to put in place. As we will see later, the anatomical metaphor of blood flow also corresponds to the geographical metaphor of rivers used by Machiavelli in chapter XXV to talk about Fortune.

Is everything in politics a matter of flows? The flow of emotions (love, fear, dread), the flow of blood spilt/shackled/oriented, the flow of supplies between the *città* and its *contado*, the flow of money between the prince and the bankers, the flow of goods, the flow of soldiers, the flow of knowledge too.

This is the understanding that emerges from chapter IX, when Machiavelli discusses the way in which the social body is divided between two *humours* that he calls "the people" and "the greats". To introduce his thoughts on the civil principality, he uses this metaphor to show how a state can be maintained whose prince is brought to power by the people (in the broadest sense of the word), and within the people by either of these two humours.

The term "humour" refers to the medical theory of Hippocrates, the famous Greek physician of the 5th century BC. According to this theory, the human body is in good health when the four humours that make it up coexist in balance. Any minor imbalance will cause a 'mood swing', and any major imbalance will pose a threat to health. So when Machiavelli speaks of two humours, the Renaissance reader

immediately understands that it must be a question of balancing the humours in question, since any imbalance could prove fatal.

The term "great" ("*i grandi*") refers to people with a certain amount of power, whether that power comes from titles of nobility, land or resources, or from the people they have under their command. The term "people" ("*il populo*") – not to be confused with the people as a whole social body – refers to those who exercise power only over themselves, within their families and in their work.

This distinction is reminiscent of the one made by Marx three centuries later, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, although these concepts are not superimposable (as for the feudal mode of production that dominated the Renaissance, it is not suitable for grasping this configuration in which the power of money takes a definite advantage). The advent of capitalism, as described by Marx, signals a change in the distribution of power within society: in capitalism, the government is systematically on the side of the greats (the bourgeois, owners of the means of production), and works with them to alienate and exploit the people. This was not necessarily the case in Machiavelli's time, for whom the government of a civil principality could come from either the people or the great. Machiavelli's vision therefore includes that of Marx, by understanding capitalism as a historically determined possibility in which the social body would be unbalanced in favour of the great. On the other hand, since Machiavelli did not engage in a systematic analysis of the relations of production, his theory of humours cannot lead to the Marxian notion of class.

Machiavelli distinguishes between these two humours by the desire that defines them: "the people do not wish to be commanded or oppressed by the greats" and "the greats do desire to command and oppress the people". The formula is terse. If the greats wish to command and oppress the people, it is because therein lies the source and proof of their power; as for the people, if they do not wish to be oppressed or commanded, it is because they wish to live as they please. In this situation, it is up to the government to maintain a dynamic balance between these two humours, insofar as it recognises that both are necessary to the social body. Machiavelli's aim here is not prescriptive, but rather an observation: in a society, those who have more power than others tend to want to command and oppress the latter; this must be taken into account, as must the desire of the people to want to live without being oppressed or commanded.

An organisation is therefore needed to balance these humours and make them serve the government and continuation of the state. Machiavelli sets out three possible outputs: the *principate* (when a prince, drawn either from the people or from the greats, is at the head of the state), *liberty* (i.e. the republican state where the different humours participate together in government) and *licence* (which is equivalent to an absence of social order and, therefore, means the right of the strongest). However this classification remains theoretical, since a social body is never a perfectly homogeneous whole and the tensions that make it up necessarily evolve over time.

5. Religion and the Church

The second element that needs to be taken into account to grasp the complexity of the relationship between prince and people is both political and apolitical, hence the difficulty: it is religion.

Here we are mainly talking about the Christian religion, although Machiavelli's reasoning can be applied to other religions, and even to non-religious beliefs. It should also be remembered that it was not until the Enlightenment in Europe that we began to speak of a separation of State and Church[29] ; and, moreover, that while such a separation may be formalized at the political level, it is never fully formalized at the social and symbolic levels.

Sticking to the method of effectual truth, Machiavelli does not say a word on the value of the Christian religion in itself. What interests him is understanding the effects that religion can have on the conduct of the State. To understand what follows, we will differentiate between *religion*, as a set of beliefs and practices, and the *Church*, as an institution led by a pope and a clergy whose authority and organisation produce decisive effects. This authority is both spiritual (dictating the morality that each believer must apply "according to their conscience"), and temporal (ecclesiastical or state laws, inspired by morality and that each believer/citizen must obey).

In Machiavelli's time, the situation was highly unusual. The election of Alexander Borgia, who became pope under the name of Alexander VI in 1492, set things alight, for his private life and ambitions ran so blatantly counter to Christian morality (he had children, was greedy for power, etc.). This led to a new split in Italy between pro- and anti-papists, which manifested itself in Florence through the growing spiritual authority of a reforming Dominican monk, Savonarola, who led a theocratic republic there from 1494 to 1498, when he was burnt alive in Piazza della Signoria. His death had been demanded by Alexander VI after Savonarola had refused to recognise his authority: under the threat that he would unleash his armies on Florence, the Pope put pressure on the Florentines to execute the monk and, after many twists and turns, was given satisfaction. In 1498, Florence returned to the fold of the Church of Rome, without losing the spirit of rebellion that had prevailed there for four years. The Republic of Florence was born in 1498, and lasted until the Medici returned to power in 1512, supported by another pope, Julius II. And a few years later, Giovanni de' Medici became Pope under the name of Leo X...

Why is Florence such an important stake in the political game of the Church? Because of its geographical location and because, for centuries, it was an important centre of Christianity. Think of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, whose dome – an architectural prowess – was completed in 1436 under the direction of Brunelleschi. Think of the many convents and religious institutions that contributed to the social life of the city, as well as its intellectual effervescence. Think of the Ecumenical Council held in Florence in 1439, which aimed to unify the Byzantine Church and the Church of Rome. Add to this that, if a people is constituted through its language, its customs and its institutions, the Christian religion can well be said to be all three at once. Hence the need for every prince to take this into account, whether he is a believer or not.

How does Machiavelli approach the question? Let's take the example of a prince's "divine right" to rule – when, crowned by a pope, a prince could claim to rule in the name of God – starting not from the legitimacy or otherwise of such a right, but from its effects. How can such a right be effective? It can only be effective if belief in its legitimacy is assured: if a people believes neither in God nor in the authority of the pope, divine right is worthless; if they believe in both, it is worth a great deal, because the effect of adherence engendered by belief will confer undeniable symbolic authority to the prince. It is in this sense that we should understand the reference in chapter XI to the antiquity of religious institutions:

[29] Dante, in his *De Monarchia*, sketches out such a separation, which may well have influenced Machiavelli.

they are so much a part of the population's way of life that they exert a strong structuring effect on society as a whole. The prince can rely on this effect, and can hardly go against it.

Machiavelli's vision of religion is therefore pragmatic: if a people is religious, it must be taken into account, and even exploited, since it is part of the realm of what can produce effects. As for the Church of Rome, prudence invites us to refer to it – while distancing ourselves from religious belief – as a type of state, which he calls an *ecclesiastical principality*. Machiavelli was also critical of Rome, believing that the Church's thirst for power had prevented the Italian principalities from uniting. But he was also critical of the principalities, who were guilty of allowing the Church to gain power without trying to contain its ambitions. It was precisely because the Church of Rome had authority not only over its own states but also over religion that it had to be dealt with diligently. As the death of Savonarola showed, its hold extended beyond physical borders, as a result of its moral and symbolic power.

6. Dis/simulation, swerve and cunning

Knowledge through effects teaches action by effects. The appearance of an action produces an effect, which may, depending on the case, be preferable to the effect of the action actually carried out. As we have seen, one of Machiavelli's original features was that he thought of the exercise of political power in terms of effects rather than normative models. He draws all the consequences from this when he considers that models can be integrated into political strategies without being defined as goals, but used as means, under certain conditions.

Machiavelli once again distances himself from the humanism of his time by reclassifying ideal ends as means that can be used both in ideological discourse and in social organisation. Take the example of religion we have just been discussing. If a prince manages to appear to be a good believer, the people, if they are believers, will feel more inclined to follow him, to listen to him and to obey him; but the prince doesn't need to *be* a good believer for that, he just needs to be believed to be one (the effect of appearance being performative only on condition that the appearance is seen to be the thing itself, which might be true or false). We would say that such a manoeuvre is dishonest, since such a prince will lie about himself; but Machiavelli then asks: which is better, between a lying prince who manages the state efficiently without being a good believer, and an honest prince who leads the state to its ruin by the very fact that he is a good believer and applies his religion to the letter? This is where the famous sentence of chapter XV comes in: "Therefore, it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity."

The difficulty is twofold: on the one hand, Machiavelli invites the prince to swerve from normative models when necessary, because, being on certain points unrealistic, applying these models to the letter would generate harmful effects for the government and the maintenance of the state; on the other, in a society that maintains certain beliefs in normative models, the prince can gain much by appearing to embody the positive qualities (the "virtues") and departing from the negative qualities (the "vices") of such models, in order to ensure social cohesion and justify his ruling position. It is no less a lie, but one that is justified because it serves political utility, conditioned by necessity; it is no less a lie, but one whose moral charge is neutralised because it is measured against the political effects it can produce.

Effectual politics thus brings us to the question of *cunning*, which consists in operating by relying on the beliefs of others (literally, it is a question of acting on the *brains*, "*con l'astuzia aggirare e cervelli delli uomini*", ch. XVIII, in other words turning heads). If trickery, akin to lying, is condemned by morality, it is only effective when it succeeds in making people believe that it is not what it is.

We could go further and ask: is morality, as Nietzsche would suggest, merely a form of instinctive cunning, a particularly specialised cunning? Or is cunning, as the Christian religion would suggest, the path taken by spirits seduced by Evil? It doesn't matter to Machiavelli: cunning can be effective, and those who refuse to use cunning risk falling into the traps of their adversaries on the one hand, and losing a crucial advantage on the other, thereby damaging the state. It is therefore necessary to learn to dispense with normative models so that our adversaries do not use them against us, and so that we can use theirs against them if necessary.

In chapter XVIII, after demonstrating the usefulness of knowing how to be as cunning as a fox, Machiavelli writes: "But it is necessary to know how to colour over this nature effectively, and to be a great pretender and dissembler [*bisogna essere grandi simulatori e dissimulatori*]. Men are so simple-minded and so controlled by their immediate needs that he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived." Machiavelli then goes on to cite the example of Pope Alexander VI, who is said to have done nothing all his life but deceive ("*ingannare*"). Now let's look at the expression he has just used: "pretender and dissembler" translates the Italian "*simulatori e dissimulatori*", probably taken, significantly, from the Roman writer Sallustus[30]. What does it mean to simulate? To produce an impression similar to what you want to appear. And to dissimulate? On the contrary, to produce an impression that is dissimilar to what you are. The two necessarily go hand in hand: if you want to appear for what you are not, we must at the same time conceal what you are.

Machiavelli did not invent this game of hide and show, which belongs to a political tradition geared towards action, and from ancient practices relating in particular to hunting and war: it is the art of camouflage. Humans have always been amazed by the ability of certain animals, insects and plants to take on the appearance of elements of their natural environment in order to disappear from the eyes of their predators, or conversely to gain a decisive advantage over their prey. Human beings do no different when they seek to "blend in with the crowd", or conversely to "stand out". The hunt is no longer literal, but represented by these coded behaviours within the natural environment that is *life in society*.

Another example: we know how architects position themselves in favour of buildings that blend into the environment or, on the contrary, stand out from it. Another example: artists and scientists worked together to create the camouflage outfits used by the military to deploy their forces without the enemy's knowledge (and to learn how to outwit the enemy's camouflage, you need to know how to use it yourself). What effect are you trying to produce? This is an essential question in all the arts, and particularly in the applied arts.

[30] In *The Conjuring of Catilina* (43 AEC), describing the eponymous politician's attempt to seize power in the Roman Republic, Sallustus describes Catilina in Chapter 5 as "*subdolus, varius, cujuslibet rei simulator ac dissimulator*". Translation: "a bold, cunning mind, rich in resources, capable of feigning and dissimulating everything". It is interesting to note that Machiavelli, in this chapter, moves further away from the Christian normative model the closer he comes to the Roman tradition (between Sallustus and Cicero). Need we recall Machiavelli's preference for republican government? But even such a government would have to be capable of cunning, on a par with those master foxes Catalina and Cesare Borgia.

Moreover, there is a link here – in this way of understanding humans as using the same ruses found elsewhere in nature – with the figure of the painter discussed earlier. The painter's trick is [1. simulation] to make one thing (his painting) look like another (the landscape he's painting), and [2. concealment] to make all the painter's work (the observation, the reflection, the choice of colours, the brushstrokes, the mistakes and the retouching) look like something it isn't (in the end, the painting presents itself to the viewer as a self-evident totality). The stake is in the transformation that leads the materials of the painting to become the materiality of the landscape... and this is probably what is meant by the verb "to colour", which Machiavelli uses on several occasions. An aesthetic dimension of politics, dis/simulation is therefore a technique in the sense in which the Greeks understood it: at once a "tool" and an "art", a means and an end, in the sense that while it serves a higher end (the aim is not to produce an effect, but to govern and maintain the State), it is also an end in itself (the aim is to produce an appearance followed by an effect, i.e. in which people will believe).

The problem of the projected image is also reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave: for Plato, the "cunning" ones are the sophists (the professional rhetoricians) who shake the statuettes (and language) in order to cast shadows on the walls of the cave. The philosophers, on the other hand, seek to emerge from the cave and free themselves from the shadows of falsehood. Machiavelli says it all: you have to be able to understand things for yourself, in order to know what kind of shadows to cast and what effects to produce. Knowing which shadows to cast is the work of *prudence*, a notion that expresses the need for knowledge through effects, for a reason turned towards practice. This is where the work of cunning ("*astuzia*") comes into play, the know-how of making and projecting shadows.

So if a prince needs to learn to use this art, it is not only to represent his own person, "his virtues and vices", but also and above all to colour his actions as a prince, and in this respect the art of dis/simulation is as necessary to the government of a principality as it is to the government of a republic, since the "colouring" of political decisions and actions plays a role precisely because what is at stake is the government of a people. Actions and decisions are wrapped up in discourse relating to values and aspirations, and in so doing are inscribed in a *way of doing* politics ("to govern" means to lead in a certain way, in a certain direction) and of projecting forward in time ("to maintain" means to envisage the situation in the long term). The matrix of this political language is always the same: the language, customs and institutions through which a people forms an effectual community. So much so that the only way to understand the art of politics is to understand ourselves in its movement: in fact, everyone speaks, everyone has customs and everyone aspires to a certain social order, so that politics is a field in which everything is always already "coloured", produced and perceived through a certain perspective ; something that can also be said of nature.

Cunning thus takes us back to the positional dynamics we analysed with the allegory of the painter. In practical terms, this means that any ruse must be adapted to the individuals it is intended to ensnare, bearing in mind that "Men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands: everyone can see, but few can feel. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are, and those few do not dare to contradict the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state to defend them." (ch. XVIII). We understand that dis/simulation, working on a big number of people, can certainly fail on a small number of individuals (who would see the deception for what it is), without affecting the success of a government in "turning minds" to its advantage. There will therefore be a critical threshold to be reached in every dis/simulation, at which point the “touch” escapes from the hands of the majority, and the realm of the visible is conquered. But what is the visible if not the domain of normative ideas? And

what is “touch” if not knowledge through effects? For Machiavelli, human beings – especially in groups – allow themselves to be seduced by ideas that appear simple and obvious, ideas that bring people together, but ideas that reality constantly overflows in complexity and diversity.

Let us conclude this reflection by asking the following question: can we do without cunning, can we do without the art of dis/simulation, and speak the truth everywhere? We know that this would be the position of Kant, for example, whose categorical imperative allows for no exceptions. We also know how sensitive this issue is, in the age of mass propaganda and marketing, and the stranglehold that industry and governments have on Big Data. What has been called *statistic governance* (cf. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Supiot) is constantly producing dis/simulations that adapt to each individual, trapping them in a network of stimuli that capture their attention at all times. In this context, the desire to free oneself from pretense and emerge from the cave is akin to the desire of the people not to be oppressed or controlled by the great. But on both sides, the matrix of political language remains the same, and everyone uses it to their own ends. The objective truth so dear to Kant is nowhere to be found as an absolute, but everywhere as an effect.

7. *Ma perché sono tristi*

The analyses we have carried out so far have shown Machiavelli to be a thinker of reality, knowable through its effects; a pragmatic thinker, whose contribution to political philosophy owes much to the distance he deems necessary to adopt towards normative models; a thinker of nature, finally, in that he does not hesitate to use animal metaphors to speak of political action; and a materialist thinker who evaluates beliefs, popular and religious, according to their concrete results. We will now turn to his anthropology, and then to the operative concepts of the virtù and fortuna.

What about human beings? Machiavelli may give the impression of being a pessimist, for example when he writes in chapter XV: "And I know that everyone will admit it would be a very praiseworthy thing to find in a prince those qualities mentioned above that are held to be good. But since it is neither possible to have them nor to observe them all completely, because the human condition does not permit it, a prince must be prudent enough to know how to escape the infamy of those vices that would take the state away from him, and be on guard against those vices that will not take it from him, whenever possible. But if he cannot, he need not concern himself unduly if he ignores these less serious vices." Just as he invited us to make good use of our swerving from normative models, he invites us not to idealise human nature, considering it impossible for a person to possess every positive quality. Rather than pessimism, we should speak of realism, which is also prophylactic in that it should prevent us from being deceived by a prince who claims to possess all the positive qualities (inevitably a liar, since this is impossible, and a bad liar since he believes he can make us believe something impossible). Machiavelli is simply repeating the famous Greek and Latin inscriptions inviting us to get to know ourselves, the meaning of which relates to the finiteness of human life: the gods may be eternal and perfect, human beings are not.

But he doesn't stop there. In chapter XVII, he writes: "For one can generally say this about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, and greedy for gain. While you work for their benefit they are completely yours, offering you their blood, their property, their lives, and

their sons, as I said above, when the need to do so is far away. But when it draws nearer to you, they turn away. The prince who relies entirely upon their words comes to ruin, finding himself stripped naked of other preparations." Here his position seems distinctly pessimistic, insofar as humans are said not to possess the positive qualities that morality generally recognises as important: gratitude, honour, honesty, courage, moderation. These positive qualities are derived from the normative models used in education as well as in social life, where they serve as a measure of our actions. Machiavelli not only does not idealise human beings, but sees them as beings who, if they were not educated and did not experience social pressure, would innocently remain distant from the positive qualities that society promotes for its own good. Every human being, insofar as he or she is part of a society, will learn to apply these qualities, but they are not ready-made: they depend on acculturation based on usefulness.

Which brings us to the other essential point in the above quotation: human beings change according to the living conditions they encounter. To a prince who can dispense abundance, they are ready to give much; but when a prince is in need, they shy away. They follow their own interests on every occasion, which reminds us of the way in which Machiavelli said he wanted to propose a method that would be "useful to anyone who understands it": he knew that his little book would be used in a thousand and one ways. Whether you read it because you belong to the people and want to defend yourself against the greats, or whether you read it because you want to learn how to command and oppress the people, every reader dreams of being the prince, if not of a kingdom, a political party or a company, at least of themselves.

We finally understand it all in Chapter XVIII, when Machiavelli writes that "In the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no tribunal to which to appeal, one must consider the final result." The final result – i.e. what is produced, the result of an action – is more important to human beings than the means used, because the most important thing for a human being is to stay alive. If, at the end of a relentless struggle, a particular person finally pulls through, we will first acknowledge the fact that he or she has done so, and then go on to criticise the means used. And if, at the end of a bitter struggle, such and such a government finally prevails, then there will always be a majority of people to line up behind it, because the majority seeks above all one thing: its own utility, that is to say first and foremost its survival.

Consequently, it is in difficult moments, when life is in danger, that human nature is revealed, and not in moments when survival is assured, since then the game of appearances seems to gain autonomy and detach itself from necessity. When our lives are threatened (literally or figuratively), the art of dis/simulation (re)becomes a natural necessity. Normative models (re)become means, and our 'imperfection' then takes on its full meaning, since it is precisely what makes us beings of movement, change and invention.

Machiavelli understands the human world as a continuation of nature; in his view, nature is made up of relationships of force and cunning; and the art of governing, which must act according to necessity, must therefore act as if the survival of the state were at stake every hour. "If men were all good, this precept would not be good. But since men are a wicked lot and will not keep their promises to you, you likewise need not keep yours to them." Once again, for Machiavelli, it is a question of *prudence*: considering survival as the primary condition of all politics should ensure that we do not make mistakes in our assessment of dangers and our response to them.

The expression "but since men are a wicked lot" translates the Italian "*ma perché sono tristi*", and there is some debate about the translation. The Italian spoken in Florence in 1512 does not understand the word "*tristi*" in the sense in which we understand "wickedness": wanting to do harm intentionally. "*Tristi*" actually refers to the idea of *falling*. Human beings are beings who fall: they are born, yes, but we all know the result; from the moment we are conceived, life may well rise, but death is no less certain. Two comparisons could be made: the first with the fall of Adam and Eve in the Bible, but we know Machiavelli's distrust of religion. The second, with the book he had copied in its entirety in his youth, Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. The author's conception of matter, close to that of Aristotle, indicates "the fall in a straight line that carries the atoms through the void" (Book II). This would seem to be a cosmological conception from which Machiavelli's anthropology derives.

So human beings are not *evil* or *bad* in a moral sense. They are captives of the movement of atoms, of the life that leads us through all sorts of circumstances over which we have no control. The error in interpreting Machiavellian anthropology would then be to think of his description of human nature in moral terms, when it is thought of in terms of effect: humans, because they are so determined and fragile, do everything they can to stay alive. That's what we see. Which is not to say that they won't join forces or form alliances, or that they aren't capable of love or benevolence; but simply that they must always face the precipice, and that it is in this face-to-face encounter that their value is *ultimately* determined.

8. *Fortuna* and *virtù*

Humans are part of nature and its interlocking cycles, like the planetary spheres in the physics of Aristotle and Ptolemy. If in their vision the Earth was at the centre of the solar system, we can understand by analogy how the individual and human societies are affected by what Machiavelli calls "*fortuna*": we are affected by the world that changes around us.

Fortuna is thus a concept of becoming: "everything flows" said Heraclitus. More precisely, fortuna is a concept of the movement of nature: as in the wheel that she spins ceaselessly, blindfolded, in common Renaissance representations of this goddess from the Greek and Roman pantheon. But to conceive of this movement as cyclical is also to understand it as a possible object of experience, insofar as recurrences are produced. This raises two questions: how can we anticipate these trends, and how can we position ourselves in facing them?

But first let's take a step backwards. The first aspect in which fortune presents itself to us is that of the unpredictability of events, pure becoming. Machiavelli writes in chapter XXV: "I compare her [fortuna] to one of those destructive rivers that, when they become enraged, flood the plains, ruin the trees and buildings, raising the earth from one spot and dropping it onto another. Everyone flees before it; everyone yields to its impetus, unable to oppose it in any way." Everything that is beyond human control. But fortune is yet more than a personification of the unforeseen, it is the unforeseen squared, an unforeseen event that is linked to another unforeseen event and so on, thus taking on a life of its own, an autonomous life. Events unfold in ways that seem to us to respond to a certain logic, but which we cannot account for, at least not entirely.

It is only in the way it affects us that things are crystal clear. When Machiavelli loses his position as secretary and is then suspected of plotting against the Medici and suffers torture, he describes "a great and continuous malignity of Fortune" (Dedicatory letter). When Cesare Borgia lost his hand on the death of his father, it was bad fortune again (ch. VII), and in neither case can the agents be held entirely responsible: there are times when events get the better of us. But insofar as events affect us, they become circumstances for us: they surround us and situate us. Fortune imposes itself on us, and all that remains is to apply the Stoic recipe, establishing the distinction between what depends on us and what does not[31], in order to bind ourselves once again to events that do not depend on us and make them our own, naming them "fortune".

This subjective appropriation ensures the agent's agency, which Machiavelli calls *virtù*. It's not an obvious word for us today, since it's caught up in echoes that either bring it closer to "virtue", i.e. the positive moral qualities that morals and religions ascribe to human beings, their actions and intentions; or to its Latin origin, "vir", which means man, in the masculine form. In Machiavelli's mind, virtù is indeed masculine, which is not to say that it is the sole preserve of men. The most famous example in his writings is Caterina Sforza, whom Machiavelli fabulated into raising her skirt on the walls of Imola.[32] Here is a woman figure undoubtedly brimming with virtù. Virtù is therefore not relative to gender or social class, because it is not a quality: it is a measure of the intensity of a being's face-to-face encounter with the nature of things. Fortuna and virtù: the two concepts are thus interdependent. If fortune is not someone's fortune, it is not fortune; it is simply the course of events, the infinite fall of matter, as Lucretius would have said, neither positive, nor negative, nor neutral.

It follows that fortune is not favourable or unfavourable in itself, but only for the person to whom it appears as such. Similarly, in the subsequent course of events, the misfortune or happiness of one person will have repercussions for many others, each of which will be favourable or unfavourable in its own way. We could say that fortune is potential for action in the making, it is the dynamic of all the roads and stories, which sometimes form avenues, sometimes steep paths, sometimes crossroads, sometimes dead ends. For while in its concrete aspect fortune determines a situation and possibly a point of leverage ("the opportunity" or “occasion”), it is also a formidable imaginary power, determining how the narrative can give rise to the possible.

Machiavelli was immersed in the culture of the Florentine Renaissance, he read Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarca, he met princes, kings and cardinals: so he knew just how much more convincing a good story could be than the surest syllogisms. Agree with me, what happened to me, say it was really bad luck – which presupposes a certain shared experience and is a sign of a community to come – and immediately you're on my side; and that's the side of the loser, of course, but a loser all the more ready to get back on the horse because there was no fault, no sin, no weakness, just a *combination of events*. Conversely, tell someone that they've had luck on their side, that fortune has smiled upon them, and

[31] In addition to the Stoic influence, we can also refer to this famous passage from Lucretius. After mentioning the fall of atoms and the *clinamen*, he concludes: "We must therefore grant atoms the same property, and recognise that there exists in them, in addition to shocks and gravity, another motive cause, from which we derive the power of the will, since, as we see, nothing can come into being from nothing". (*On Nature*, Book II. Translation by Alfred Ernaut, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1947).

[32] On the different versions of this story written by Machiavelli, see the article by Julia L. Hairston, *Skirting the issue, Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza*, 2000.

you'll see everyone rush to celebrate and perhaps dip a few toes in that smiling river. Because without doubt, like all invisible things, fortune is contagious.

Fortune thus produces a form of equality: in the face of things that do not depend on us, we are equal, not only because we do not decide them, but also because fortune takes precedence over all inequalities, starting with birth and wealth, which lead some individuals to rule over others. The richest businessman can lose everything on a bad investment, the most powerful king can die of food poisoning, while on the other hand, because he is in a certain place at a certain time, anyone can suddenly become rich, powerful, happy, and so on. Nevertheless, Fortune is not anarchy. For while on the one hand it undermines and relativises the position of princes, on the other it does not intervene to establish equality (it is not Providence). It is insofar as it is the order of things that do not depend on us that it makes us all equal; but as regards to those things that do depend on us, it remains silent. In fact, when we have no one to convince of our good story, when we tell it only to ourselves, fortune will never prove us wrong and we will always be able to believe ourselves linked to it by a singular and privileged bond, in good fortune or in bad. Machiavelli, the poet and playwright, knows this well: our power of fabulation makes us the equal of God.

But as a man and a politician, he knows that the domain of things that depend on us, which is properly the domain of virtù, is not given once and for all. Virtù can grow and shrink, it is a muscle, it is exercised, and it is exercised in the essential tension that brings it into conflict with fortune. Once again, there can be no virtù without a face-to-face encounter with fortuna, which can only take place through action. Machiavelli says as much when he insists that the prince should use his own weapons, not mercenaries or the armies of other states. In Chapter XIII, he writes: "If one looks for the first signs of the downfall of the Roman Empire it will be found to have begun with the hiring of the Goths as mercenaries. From that beginning the armed forces of the Roman Empire began to be weakened, and all the virtue [*virtù*] taken away from it was given over to the Goths." A transfer took place: the Roman soldiers stopped practising war, while the Goths practised more and more. In contact with the fortunes they encountered during their campaigns, they acquired experience and exercised that muscle which is only useful in making the most of both favourable and unfavourable circumstances (and can't the same thing be said of education, of the family environment in which we grow up, which prepares us, in a thousand different ways, to make our circumstances our own, or on the contrary to suffer them? Does this passage from Machiavelli not foreshadow the social reproduction envisaged by Bourdieu, and its effect on the psychological positioning of individuals in relation to themselves and society?) To exercise one's virtù is to be prepared to be decisive, is to be empowered. It means riding the destructive rivers, cautious if possible, in the face of the fishtails of fate that can occur at any moment.

This is why Machiavelli is still wary of the "image of things" and of government as it "ought to be" (ch. XV), preferring the effectual truth: because it is easy to get caught in the trap of one's own story, and because once the path has been mapped out, once the habit has been set, it is difficult to change course, and instead of getting out of the rut one slips into it to one's ruin, convinced that at the end of the tunnel is the light promised by poets, like Dante, and by philosophers, like Plato, who believe that reality can take the form of our desire for justice.

How does Machiavelli tell us to deal with fortune? Let us quote at length from chapter XXV: "I am not unaware that many have held, and do still hold, the opinion that the affairs of this world are controlled by Fortune and by God, that men cannot control them with their prudence, and that, on the contrary, men can have no remedy whatsoever for them. For this reason, they might judge that it is

useless to lose much sweat over such matters, and let them be controlled by fate. This opinion has been held all the more in our own times because of the enormous upheavals that have been observed and are being observed every day– events beyond human conjecture. When I have thought about it, sometimes I am inclined to a certain degree towards their opinion. Nevertheless, in order not to wipe out our free will, I consider it to be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one half of our actions, but that she still leaves the control of the other half, or almost that, to us." This stance against fatalism echoes many others, from Maimonides' attack on astrology to Voltaire's attack on Leibniz's best possible world. As usual, Machiavelli does not theorise free will. His philosophical stance is geared towards action: insofar as something depends on us, it is up to us to practise it, in order to increase, if possible, the area where our virtù can reach. Machiavelli's use of the term makes it clear that he is not issuing a peremptory judgement, but proposing an approach that could be described as performative: we don't know exactly how much of our actions fortune controls, but in order "not to wipe out our free will", it is better for us to think that fortune is in control of only half of them, and that we can therefore rise to the occasion and meet them on an equal footing. Half, "or almost that", "*o quasi*" says the Italian: an extraordinarily offhand sentence which shows that what really matters is not so much a dispute about the exact proportion of our power to act in relation to fortune, but the intensity with which we exercise that power.

This applies to the government of the State and of armies, just as it applies to the attitude of the prince towards his subjects, allies and enemies, just as it applies to the way in which each and every one of us is the agent of our own story. Once the game has been played, the situation will be assessed in terms of effectual truth: "In the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no tribunal to which to appeal, one must consider the final result." (ch. XVIII) But in the meantime, in the interstice opened up by the action, as long as the outcome has not been decided, we will stick to this formula: we have at least a 50% chance of winning, which on the one hand is encouraging and on the other encourages caution. However, even if we make careful and decisive use of the cards in our hand, some days it will be 10/90, other days 75/25, since fortune is variable.

Machiavelli, in a passage from chapter XXV famous for its misogyny, compares fortune to a woman: "*la donna è mobile",* as we might say in the famous aria from Verdi's opera *Rigoletto*. He wrote: "I certainly believe this: that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortune is a woman, and if you want to keep her under it is necessary to beat her and force her down. It is clear that she more often allows herself to be won over by impetuous men than by those who proceed coldly. And so, like a woman, Fortune is always the friend of young men, for they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity." A male virtù is matched by a female fortuna, according to the old virilist cliché that makes nature a feminine, changeable entity that man must subdue in order to "shape" it. Here, although these notions can be deconstructed, the Machiavellian man of action belongs to the patriarchal paradigm.

Speaking of Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus "and other similar" male heroic figures, Machiavelli writes in Chapter VI: "In examining their deeds and their lives, one can see that they received nothing from Fortune except opportunity, which gave them the material they could mould into whatever form they liked. Without that opportunity the strength of their spirit would have been exhausted, and without that strength, their opportunity would have come in vain." Apart from the logical error – since in the absence of an agent there can be no occasion – it is clear from this passage how the sexual metaphor reduces the female part to the passivity of "matter". At times Machiavelli makes fortune a mere provider

of opportunity, at other times he makes it the figure of a destructive nature that stops at nothing. It is this ambiguity that we will now discuss, in conclusion of this chapter.

In the case of the “heroes of civilisation” we have just mentioned, the dynamics – real or imagined – show the agent as the victor over fortune, insofar as his virtù dominates the power struggle. But in the case of the "long and continuous malignity of fortune" that Machiavelli evokes at the end of his Dedicatory letter, it is fortune that has conquered, and the defeated man who asks for mercy by submitting to the prince. By submitting, he reverses the dynamic by becoming passive himself, mixing with fortune and presenting himself to the prince as a possible opportunity to be seized.

Machiavelli undoubtedly understood the lesson of fortune, in the sense that throughout this letter, as throughout the book, he constantly changes his position. Variable, then.

It’s the dynamics that really matters: “Without a doubt, princes become great when they overcome difficulties and obstacles imposed upon them. And therefore, Fortune – especially when she wishes to increase the reputation of a new prince, who has a greater need to acquire reputation than a hereditary prince does – creates enemies for him, and has them undertake enterprises against him so that he will have the chance to overcome them and to climb higher up the ladder his enemies have brought him. Thus, many people judge that a wise prince must cunningly foster some hostile action, whenever he has the opportunity, so that in repressing it his greatness will emerge all the more." (ch. XX) This is an astonishing personification of fortune, to which Machiavelli lends an intention here, that of "wishing to increase their reputation", as if, among its tendencies and currents, fortune were developing a sensitivity that enabled it to foresee who could strengthen such a dynamic through the exercise of its virtù. The image that comes to mind is once again that of a power struggle, but one that is also, as the end of chapter XVIII suggests, an erotic struggle. Is Fortuna Machiavelli's Beatrice? He places at the heart of the world's movement a power whose existence enables us to see any event – favourable or unfavourable – as an opportunity to grow. To turn the whole world into a potential opportunity is, we might conclude, the virtù of the mind. And wisdom: to choose your opportunities wisely.

9. *La qualità dei tempi*

In chapter XXV, Machiavelli recounts how Pope Julius II gained everything because fortune, at the time, favoured the impetuous attitude that was his. But "if times that required proceeding with caution had arrived, his ruin would have followed, for he would never have deviated from those methods to which his nature inclined him." In the rut of his temperament, he would not have been able to change, to mix with fortune to reinvent himself in the face of its reversals." I therefore conclude that, since Fortune varies and men remain obstinate in their ways, men prosper when the two are in harmony [*concordano insieme*] and fail to prosper when they are not in accord." When in doubt, as we have seen, for Machiavelli it is better to be spirited than circumspect, but this is a poor substitute, since what concludes a situation is the quality of an encounter, between the nature of an agent and the nature of the times shaped by fortune. For the author of *The Prince*, then, there is no recipe, and it is better to look at what he does rather than at what he says.

It's not for lack of trying. Isn't there a way of determining this *qualità dei tempi*, the quality of the times? We said it when we introduced the notion of fortune: nature is cyclical, fortune is cyclical.

Machiavelli's resources for understanding fortune are first the works of historians (Livy, Polybius, Thucydides): similar situations can arise again and again, with the same effects. Then there are the works of philosophers, such as Plato, who discusses the cyclical succession of political systems in Book VIII of *The Republic*, and the Stoics, who speculate on the return of all things to their principle. Lastly, there is astrology, a science that enjoyed great success during the Renaissance because – like statistics today – it allows us to anticipate future times, the question of its accuracy being irrelevant. Here astrology is a good illustration of Machiavellian thinking in that it combines two types of analysis: the first focuses on the tendencies inherent in an individual, the second on the tendencies inherent in the future of the world and of communities. Popes and kings, bankers and artists all had their personal astrologers close at hand, at a time when Christianity was in crisis and the wisdoms of the past were resurfacing. Machiavelli, for example, called on an astrologer to determine the best day and time for the army of the Republic of Florence to enter the reconquered city of Pisa.[33]

In his *Tetrabiblos*, Claudius Ptolemy wrote about astrology what we might be tempted to put into Machiavelli's mouth about fortune: "the stars incline, but do not determine". Fortune is certainly not destiny: destiny is of necessity, whereas fortune, in principle, allows room for manoeuvre. Fortune is not God: God is the sanction of effectual truth, whereas fortune is the playmate of the willing man. Fortune is not immutable, but changeable. In the movement of the wheel and in the movement of the stars, it produces times whose quality demands that we be impetuous, other times whose quality demands that we be circumspect, and a hundred other qualities that call for a hundred other attitudes on the part of the agent. Once again, whatever the reality of such projections, they serve first and foremost to storicise the action, to give it a ground from which to launch out, a slope on which to take off.

In the never-ending dialogue between virtù and fortune, three "times" finally stand out. First, there is the time of peace, during which we must work to build dykes in anticipation of the destructive rivers, and exercise ourselves to produce that "orderly virtue [*ordinata virtù*]" (ch. XXV) that will enable us to resist them. Then there's the time for action, when everything comes together feverishly, when an intense struggle begins that gives birth to fortune at the whim of the opponent's virtù, when all the prudence you are capable of will be weighed in the balance, and when you can be the virtuoso of your own virtù. Finally, the time of the aftermath, the time of results, when a new reality has emerged, a new quality of time, with which human beings, willy-nilly, will try to find a new 'agreement'.

[33] For more on this subject, see Anthony J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, Yale University Press, 1992. "In his 1509 campaign against Pisa, Machiavelli himself was advised by his friend Lattanzio Tedaldi as to the *punto* to take possession of the city. "Thursday being the day to take possession of Pisa, under no circumstances should the Florentines enter the city before 12.30. A little after 13.00 would be the most propitious for us. If Thursday is not suitable, Friday will be the next best, again after 13.00, but not before 12.30; and the same applies to Saturday, if Friday is not suitable. And if it is not suitable to keep either to the day or to the hour, take a suitable time in nomine Domini." " (p. 17) If astrology doesn't work, we appeal to God!

Replies, debates, discussions

1. Machiavelli's misogyny

The passage in chapter XXV of *The Prince* in which Machiavelli compares fortune to a woman is part of the patriarchal paradigm of his time. The misogyny is blatant: "it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortune is a woman, and if you want to keep her under it is necessary to beat her and force her down." The fact that Machiavelli is advocating rape here has never left the students with whom I have worked on this text indifferent, nor myself.

If *The Prince* is, in its very concepts, characteristic of a virilist vision of gender relations, in which women are summoned only to occupy a subordinate position, it is important to discuss whether and how Machiavelli's concepts can be thought of and used today. In a philosophy course, you don't study Machiavelli before you've studied Plato: the same patriarchal paradigm applies here and there, although between classical Greece and the Renaissance the Romans happened, Romans who have nothing to envy the Greeks in terms of virilist ideology, quite the contrary.

A review of the role and place of women throughout history will immediately make sense from this perspective. In the corpus of Western philosophy, there are a few names and few texts. We could look at the character of Diotime in Plato' *Symposium*, analyse the possibility opened up by Plato for women to be among the guardians of the ideal city, or evoke the role played by Aspasia in the education of Socrates, and more broadly in the Athenian society. Read poems by Sappho, talk about Hypatia the Neoplatonist, read extracts from *La Cité des Dames* (1405) by Christine de Pizan. And why not go straight into *Les Guérillères* (1969) by Monique Wittig, or *King Kong théorie* (2006) by Virginie Despentes?

We could also work on the gender of concepts: is the concept of fortune comprehensible if we subtract its feminine gender, if we de-gender it? Since virtù is clearly marked as masculine, how can we grasp these polarities outside the gendered distribution of power? The idea would be to 'detach' the gender of concepts from the gender of beings (after having done so with the biologically assigned sexes), and thus translate masculine/feminine into active/passive, without linking the first pair to the second. Isn't fortune necessarily a material of/for all genders and none, of all signs, of all identities and especially of those that change?

It might be relevant to read Simone de Beauvoir's reworking of Hegel's dialectic of domination and servitude at the beginning of *The Second Sex*. As I indicated in my analysis of the concepts of *The Prince*, Machiavelli himself plays with these positions, not hesitating to put himself in the passive position in the Dedicatory letter, only to turn around and assume that of the "master" at another point. He is certainly a "changeable" man, and the fortune he invites to strike and beat, for he who has suffered the *strappado*, must undoubtedly have been of some inspiration to him.

Reading about Machiavelli's work, one cannot help but be struck by the fact that he is an author who attracts men, in academic circles and elsewhere, far more than women. It's easy to see why, an obvious fact that is all the more worthy of questioning. What legitimacy do our societies and our modes of education and teaching produce for women and minorities when it comes to thinking about politics? About war? History? And to take part in them? Among the students I had the opportunity to work with,

teenagers, the ease with which some of the boys thought they were in a video game when we talked about a contemporary conflict (it was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022) was a good springboard for getting to grips with this issue. For example, I tried to short-circuit this 'ease' by getting them all to talk about the emotions that wars and atrocities of today elicit in them. In this respect, my experience was that a community very quickly formed that had not much to do with gender.

In the associations of ideas common in Machiavelli's time (and ours), to compare fortune to a woman is still to compare nature to a woman. So is this an apology for the exploitation of nature, which is only recognised as an entity in its own right in this relationship of domination? The link with Descartes' famous phrase, "to make oneself as master and possessor of nature", in the sixth part of the *Discourse on the Method*, is easy to establish. Placing the threatening aspects of nature for the human world in perspective with human attempts to control or channel these forces, right up to the reversal of the Anthropocene where it is humans who have become a systemic risk for the earth's ecosystem, echoes with the positional fluidity mentioned above.

Last but not least, we can highlight women of the Renaissance, in order to break through this scene dominated entirely by men. The first one would be Caterina Sforza, stateswoman, intellectual and alchemist, whose account by Machiavelli of her prowess at the siege of Imola certainly gives food for thought (see Julia L. Hairston's article, *Skirting the issue, Machiavelli's Caterina Sforza*). There are others: Lucrezia Borgia, whose 'black legend' is now being called into question by historians. Caterina de' Medici, daughter of Lorenzo II (to whom Machiavelli dedicated *The Prince*), became the best ambassador for this “little work” in France, where she was crowned queen in 1547. Then we’d turn to women outside of the aristocratic circles, starting with the woman with whom Machiavelli shared his life, Marietta Corsini, and from there into the lifestyles, customs, possibilities and limitations imposed to the women of the time. In the ties that bind them to each other, to men, and men to women, we could end up questioning the erotic, heteroerotic, homoerotic and queer culture that developed in Florence — a 'licentious' city if ever there was one!

2. The end justifies the means, if...

A common opinion on Machiavelli makes him the author of a sentence he never wrote: "the end justifies the means". Two passages in his work come close, but they do not give credence to this formula, which appears to be a faulty oversimplification.

In *The Prince*, he writes in ch. XVIII: "Men in general judge more by their eyes than their hands: everyone can see, but few can feel. Everyone sees what you seem to be, few touch upon what you are, and those few do not dare to contradict the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state to defend them. In the actions of all men, and especially of princes, where there is no tribunal to which to appeal, one must consider the final result."

In the *Discourses*, I, 9: "A wise mind will never condemn someone for having used a means outside the ordinary rules to govern a monarchy or found a republic. What is desired is that if the fact accuses him, the result excuses him; if the result is good, he is acquitted."

The first point is that Machiavelli does not give free rein to any action, since his thinking focuses on political action: to regulate a monarchy, to found a republic, or, as he writes in *The Prince*, "to maintain

and govern the state" (ch. II). If an action led by a prince achieves this goal, then all means are good, of course. But you need to read the whole book. Machiavelli warns against the excessive use of violence (chapter VIII); he also warns that a prince who has the hatred or contempt of the population against him cannot last (chapter XIX). These two aspects considerably limit the means that a government can use if its aim is indeed to *maintain* and *govern* the state, and if we give these two words their full extension and depth.

The second point is that there is no court to which to appeal, and this is an opportunity to discuss the role played by the United Nations General Council or the International Court of Justice. The recommendations of the former rarely have a leverage effect on ongoing conflicts; as for the judgements of the latter, months or years after the fact, while they provide essential restorative justice for victims and may have an influence on the development of the law, they have no impact on the immediacy of wars and massacres. Machiavelli's analysis therefore deserves to be discussed. "Consider the final result" means that, faced with a *fait accompli*, the survivors of a political conflict or war have no choice but to take account of what has happened and, on that basis, form a new way of being in the present and future world. The way in which a population is forced to come to terms with what has happened could be called a "community of what has happened". "If the result is good" is only one of many possibilities, so that such a community – or rather communities – can be formed against the result, which is judged to be bad or disastrous. Machiavelli sticks to his method of effectual truth, without making any moral judgements about the actions of rulers, or about the actions of the governed, who may rise up against a given result. For Machiavelli, acknowledging the facts is never tantamount to submission to authority.

Third point, the concept of *raison d'Etat* is anachronistic if we are talking about Machiavelli, because it enshrines a type of separation between the population and the ruling elites that did not exist during the Renaissance. In short, this separation will be effective after the rise of the bourgeoisie, both in the appropriation of the means of production and in that of knowledge. An oligarchic, technocratic government speaks of raison d'Etat in order to justify its actions, whatever they may be (repression, special operations, torture camps, etc.), in the eyes of the majority. Those who are fooled by it are generally those who find it useful to maintain the distribution of power that this justification hypostases.

3. The adjective "machiavélique"

"1. Qui est digne de la doctrine de Machiavel, considérée comme négation de la morale : Politique machiavélique. 2. Qui est d'une grande perfidie, d'une scélératesse tortueuse : Projet, personnage machiavélique. Synonymes : diabolique, scélérat, tortueux." (Larousse)

Few philosophers have had the privilege of having their name adjectivized, and this word to develop into a life of their own. Plato is the only one I can think of, and the expression 'platonic love' is as far removed from the philosophy of the author of the *Symposium* as 'plan machiavélique' is from that of Machiavelli. And it's not the fault of the French. For the English adjective *machiavellian* we find: "1. of or relating to Machiavelli or Machivallianism. 2. suggesting the principles of conduct laid down by Machiavelli, specifically: marked by cunning, duplicity, or bad faith." (Merriam Webster). And for Italian *machiavèllico*: "1. che appartiene o si refersice a Niccolò Machiavelli; che si ispira aux princìpi di

amoralità, di cinismo e di doppiezza tradizionalmente attribuiti al pensiero del Machiavelli. 2. seguace delle teorie e della prassi etica et politica del Machiavelli." (Grande Dizionario).

By the way, Italian has a panoply of words that would make any other language green with envy: *machiavellàgine, machiavellare, machiavelleggiante, machiavelleggiare, machiavellerì, machiavellescaménte, machiavellésco, machiavellianaménte, machiavelliano, machiavèllica, machiavellicaménte, machiavellièro, machiavellino, machiavellista...*

To explain this highly charged connotation, Jean Giono (and can one suspect the man of Machiavellianism, who lived through the trenches of Verdun and later claimed to be a pacifist?) put forward this judicious (if not cunning) lead in 1955:

> "What could poor Niccolò have done to everyone? He didn't invent gunpowder or the police!
>
> I'm told: "No, but he did report such-and-such. – Who did he report? – Someone who was into politics. – Politics? Judging by the wrong side of the word (and that's what it usually means), he should be congratulated. – Yes, but we all play politics.
>
> That's the eel under the rock. After all, we are all involved in politics: whether it's at the level of the General or Municipal Council (and we believe ourselves to be Caesar) or at the level of the lead article in the daily partisan newspaper (and we believe ourselves to be Saint Paul or Saint George) or whether we practice the politics of passions in general (and we believe ourselves to be Don Juan, Ford or Buffalo Bill).
>
> People never like to come down from a pedestal (especially if it's just a soapbox). But we're dead set against anyone who knows how to get up there, doesn't use it, and give the game away". (pp. IX-X)

As is often the case in the history of ideas, bad reputation comes from opponents and contradictors, in this case those who saw in Machiavelli's writings not an error, but a danger. A danger to the state (for example, Frederick II and Voltaire published their *Anti-Machiavelli* in 1740), a danger to morality (*The Prince* was banned by the Church as early as 1559), and ultimately a danger to all those who coveted any kind of authority.

So, masks off? Everyone is playing a game. The question being: is it even possible to be sincere? Or at least not to be duplicitous? Are there people so "simple" that they are never devious? So generous and selfless that they are never treacherous? And if not in deed or word, then in thought? But if we follow this slope, we will soon be like those directors of conscience – and casuistry may be Machiavellian, but it is contrary to Machiavelli's view to singularity – who look in the smallest nooks and crannies, under the smallest stones, behind the smallest slip of the tongue, for a reason to suspect you of being 'something', something to be condemned, no doubt, and the best way to trip someone up is to reproach them the way they walk, to make them 'aware' of it, in short, to reason them like one would pin a butterfly in an entomoralogist's ledger (a blend word that Voltaire would have loved!).

Of course, the only thing we have retained from this whole story is a sentence from Chapter VIII and a bit from Chapter XVIII: wickedness and breaking one's word, both of which are justified under certain conditions in the eyes of the Florentine. *Under certain conditions*.

Let's look at keeping one's word. What century was more hypocritical in this respect than the 19th, the very century that took its cue from Kant and the categorical imperative? Has there ever been a policy

– that of the European nation states – more concerned with passing off its own interests as universal values? Is there any political system more likely to break its promises than parliamentarianism, in which, in order to get elected, everyone presents themself as a defender of the people, until they are no more than a happy pawn of lobbyists and partisan logic?

Machiavelli view is quite different: "A wise ruler, therefore, cannot and should not keep his word when such an observance would be to his disadvantage, and when the reasons that caused him to make a promise are removed. If men were all good, this precept would not be good. But since men are a wicked lot and will not keep their promises to you, you likewise need not keep yours to them. A prince never lacks legitimate reasons to colour over his failure to keep his word." (ch. XVIII). The colouring is rightly seen as a form of lying, and this is the art of dis/simulation. But in this passage, what shocks most people isn't that, it's not even that we give ourselves the right to break our word, it's what's in the middle: "men are a wicked lot and will not keep their promises to you". For everyone uses their own word as they were God, placing their hope of salvation and that of society as a whole in it (ah, if only we could live in a world governed by the categorical imperative and by men of good will!) This is to misunderstand human nature, replies Machiavelli. For who has never been angry, not at being lied to, but at being lied to badly? Who hasn't wished that certain things were hidden from them, or that some part of reality was magically concealed? That's human nature too, especially if you're not lucky enough to get up at 5.30 every morning to the sound of "Es ist Zeit!" and spend the day in a small town in East Prussia studying philosophy.

A prince must break his word if : 1. it is harmful for him to keep it, 2. the reasons which made him promise it have been extinguished. Both conditions are necessary since it is in the prince's interest to keep his word as long as it is not harmful to do so, and since even if it is harmful if the reasons that made us give our word have not died out it could be more dangerous not to keep it. Weighing up interests. Machiavelli bases his proposal on political utility and on the advantage or disadvantage that a government can derive from an agreement. What could be more foolish than a government that continues to honour the terms of a treaty when its former ally has turned against it?

Machiavelli's thinking is therefore not the negation of morality, but its suspension. We know that he has his morality well in place, for example in chapter XVI: " generosity employed in such a way as to give you a reputation for it will injure you, because if it is employed virtuously and as one should employ it, it will not be recognized" – generosity is what you do, not what you claim. But political utility rarely coincides with ascetic virtues. The problem with morality is that it aims to be universal, to be applicable in all circumstances, whereas political action must always be concerned with the singular. Machiavelli does the exact opposite of casuistry... as heir to Lucretius, for whom nothing repeats itself in exactly the same way.

I once asked a class to form small groups and decide together on an ideal government, in which, of the 4-5 people in each group, each would be a minister and administer an important aspect of public life. That day, almost all the groups opted for a tyrannical regime. Why was this? We discussed it, and the most plausible explanation seemed to be: because it's the only way to make politics resemble morality. Adolescence being an age of strong moral development (between rejection and acquisition of group norms), we were faced with the strange paradox that the most “machiavélique” plan is at the same time the most moral form of organisation.

4. Young and old

At the end of the first chapter of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes a few lines about youth in politics which contrast sharply with the end of chapter XXV of *The Prince*. The question is whether or not young people are qualified to study and engage in politics. Aristotle's argument, based on the idea that young people are guided by their passions, concludes that they are not; Machiavelli concludes the opposite, based on the idea that young people take more risks and are therefore more likely to seize the opportunities that fortune presents them with. Here are the two texts.

Aristotle: “Now each man judges well what he knows, and of these things he is a good judge: on each particular matter then he is a good judge who has been instructed in it, and in a general way the man of general mental cultivation. Hence the young man is not a fit student of Moral Philosophy, for he has no experience in the actions of life, while all that is said presupposes and is concerned with these: and in the next place, since he is apt to follow the impulses of his passions, he will hear as though he heard not, and to no profit, the end in view being practice and not mere knowledge. And I draw no distinction between young in years, and youthful in temper and disposition: the defect to which I allude being no direct result of the time, but of living at the beck and call of passion, and following each object as it rises. For to them that are such the knowledge comes to be unprofitable, as to those of imperfect self-control: but, to those who form their desires and act in accordance with reason, to have knowledge on these points must be very profitable." (Translation by D. P. Chase)

Machiavelli: "I certainly believe this: that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortune is a woman, and if you want to keep her under it is necessary to beat her and force her down. It is clear that she more often allows herself to be won over by impetuous men than by those who proceed coldly. And so, like a woman, Fortune is always the friend of young men, for they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity."

I have already discussed Machiavelli's misogyny in this passage, and elsewhere the erotic of the fortuna/virtù pair that runs throughout the book. The idea that ‘women’ would prefer 'young men' is of course questionable, but let's accept it as a premise and see where the reasoning leads. What is important for Machiavelli is the importance of impetuousness and audacity: without these qualities, a prince would not be able to take the risks necessary to conquer, maintain and govern a state. These are qualities akin to virtù.

Aristotle's idea that, in politics, we should be masters of our passions and guided by reason alone is opposed by all the revolutions that have succeeded (but for Aristotle, revolutions are undoubtedly a bad thing...). Machiavelli's view is opposed by all the revolutions that have failed through lack of experience and preparation.

Machiavelli is not anti-Aristotelian for that, since his concept of prudence applies to the experience and rationality dear to Aristotle. To exercise prudence is to learn to no longer live under the sway of the passions, and to refer oneself to the past of experience is to "grow old"; whereas virtù is to be ready to take the initiative, to become contemporary with events as they happen, and in this sense to "grow younger". Understood in this way through two verbs, these two measures of complete one another.

To discuss this topic, it would be interesting to bring together people of different ages and ask them to share their experiences. Older people will remember their youth, and will be able to say how they

have (or have not) found answers in their passions and experiences. Younger people will be able to say how they perceive a society that remains in the hands of its elders, whether we're talking about gerontocracy or the rationality of acquired experience. Don't older people get caught up in their own habits and prejudices? Don't they have too strong a preference for their quiet corner by the fire? And the younger ones, how do they deal with their own prejudices, which one day may become old hat? How do they manage their passions, what qualities do they recognise in them? And so on.

5. An economy of violence

Machiavelli theorises an economy of the use of violence that is striking for its lack of empathy. This is certainly a suspension of morality, but it is also a purely utilitarian relationship to the "government and maintenance of the state": since the state cannot survive without some use of – or at least preparation for – violence, it all comes down to measure its adequateness.

Machiavelli understands violence as a *natural and ordinary necessity*. Thus when he speaks of newly acquired states at the beginning of chapter III: "This stems from another natural and ordinary necessity, which is that a new prince must always harm his new subjects, both with his soldiers as well as with countless other injuries involved in his new conquest." It is a question of being attentive to what actually happens, while calling a spade a spade: *countless other injuries*. Any change of regime, whether within a country or as a result of an invasion, generates changes of such nature that the injustices are bound to be innumerable. In this context, it is first and foremost up to any government to make choices that will ensure that such a change does not (re)occur any time soon: the stability of the State is de facto equivalent to the maintenance of a justiciary paradigm.

After discussing the question of colonies and asserting that they were a better choice than maintaining an army of occupation, Machiavelli writes: "I conclude that these colonies are not expensive, they are more loyal, they are less injurious, and the offended can do no harm since they are poor and scattered (as I have said). Concerning this, it should be noted that men must be either caressed or wiped out; because they will avenge minor injuries, but cannot do so for grave ones. Any harm done to a man must be of the kind that removes any fear of revenge." Machiavelli's attitude may well be described here as *cynical*, in the common sense of the word, to express his detachment from morality; yet he also indicates what he has read and seen done by many past and present governments, a list which has since grown longer without much change in method, only in the means used. He may well be called a *realist*, but what this veils is precisely the fact that such an attitude is not neutral insofar as the 'tried and tested methods' are by definition those of the past.

His economy of violence can be summed up in a few words: the use of violence should be measured by the inability of the offended to take revenge. Thus, when a principate is conquered, he advises assassinating not only the prince but his entire lineage. In Chapter III, he pursues the same logic, indicating that colonisation is a viable strategy against those who are "poor and scattered", since they cannot fight back. He concludes with a one-to-one rule: either flatter men, i.e. give them new titles, possessions and key positions, or annihilate them, depending on their subsequent capacity for revenge. These two types of action refer to the same anthropological premise, reaffirmed in ch. IX and XVIII, namely that a prince must trust no one, neither the people nor the greats. While Machiavelli's

equanimity in this respect is unfailing, he writes that "the end pursued by the people is more honest than that of the great, for the latter wish to oppress and the former not to be oppressed": it is necessary to act towards everyone according to their nature (ch. IX).

This economy of violence is rooted in a politics of the passions. He addresses this point in Chapter XVII to emphasise the importance of avoiding hatred, against which, once unleashed, the prince is powerless: "let him abstain from the property of others, for men forget the death of their father more quickly than the loss of their patrimony". He takes up the same motif in chapter XIX: "what makes him [the prince] hated above all else is being rapacious and a usurper of the property and the women of his subjects." Here Machiavelli places two limits on the use of violence, limits justified by their consequences in terms of passion: there are types of suffering that human beings do not forget and that lead them to hatred and the desire for revenge. Isolated, they may not be a danger, but gathered together they will certainly become one, which is why princes "should concentrate upon avoiding those things that make him hated and contemptible."

If violence can lead to hatred, it is in fear that it takes root. We could discuss fear at length from an anthropological point of view; from a political point of view, fear exists because power exists, manifested in physical violence, class, gender and racial violence, and the violence of laws and institutions. But in Machiavelli, fear appears as a continuum, since it manifests itself not only on the side of the subjects, but also on the side of the prince: "For a prince should have two fears: one internal, concerning his subjects; the other external, concerning foreign powers." (ch. XIX). And he makes fear respond to fear, since an army of its own must frighten and dissuade enemies from the outside; while at home he thinks it necessary for the government to be feared (fear of punishment) because of human nature, humans seeking their own utility and showing morality and respect for the laws only when it suits them.

A prince who abuses violence, however, fails in Machiavelli's eyes on an essential point: "it cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow citizens, to betray allies, to be without faith, without pity, without religion; by these means one can acquire power, but not glory." (ch. IX) There would be good and bad violence, and therefore good and bad fear. Bad is that which only ensures power. Good is that which can contribute to glory. Would glory then be the assumption of violence in the body of the State? The moment when the interests of the subjects converge with those of the government? Fear does not disappear, however; it transforms, it mutates (in a thousand possible ways).

This idea is central to the way in which Machiavelli, in Chapter VIII, conditions the use of cruelty: "I believe that this depends on whether cruelty be badly or well used. Those cruelties are well used (if it is permitted to speak well of evil) that are carried out in a single stroke, done out of necessity to protect oneself, and then are not continued, but are instead converted into the greatest possible benefits for the subjects. Those cruelties are badly used that, although few at the outset, increase with the passing of time instead of disappearing." What Machiavelli warns against is the passion for violence, a perversion of power if ever there was one. Cruelty – violence that is showed as violence – is well used when, conversely, it is limited by political utility. The Italian says "*e dipoi non vi si insiste dentro, ma si convertono in più utilità de' subditi che si può*". This happens "afterwards" because cruelty should only be used as a last resort, "out of necessity" to defend oneself, unlike the ordinary violence of acts of government whose injustice must be measured and distributed for the benefit of the maintenance and government of the State. But it's all the same, only the temporality changes. Ordinary violence is also summoned to be "converted into the greatest possible benefits for the subjects", but, as the government is not then

in a situation of emergency, it must, in its very administration, contain the seeds of its transformation; whereas in the case of cruelty, the act is carried out in extremis and must then be transformed.

Between fear and glory, then, there is a transcensus of violence, to which responds the quality of the alliance and loyalty of the subjects in the whole-body of the State. Excessive violence leads to the loss of both, and to hatred. At the other end of the spectrum, an excess of mercy (which amounts to a failure to use ordinary violence effectively) also leads to the dissolution of the bond of loyalty: "With a very few examples of cruelty, he will prove more compassionate than those who, out of excessive mercy, permit disorders to continue from which arise murders and plundering, for these usually injure the entire community, while the executions ordered by the prince injure specific individuals." (ch. XVII)

Machiavelli's emphasis once again on communities, which constitute the power of the state, shows the extent to which he thinks in terms of whole and parts, in the manner of Aristotle, for whom "the part is prior to the whole" (*Politics*, I, 2, 1253 a 20) and is only fully realised when it is integrated into it (cf. mereology).

The government is not the whole, it is a part whose function is to ensure the cohesion of the whole (and there is no cohesion except in the movement towards glory). The loyalty of subjects (from the particular to the whole) is linked to the fear that the prince must inspire to external potentates (the whole must be united) and to the fear that he must inspire in his subjects (from the whole to the particular).

Violence therefore appears in Machiavelli's thinking as the counterpoint to the interests of the subjects (the people and the greats), ensuring the continuity of the form of the state.

6. Capitalism and neo-feudalism

In 1967, Antony Jay – an author the world has probably forgotten since – published his book *Management and Machiavelli*, a study of the similarities between the art of governing and business management: "The new science of management is in fact no more than an extension of the old art of governing, and by studying in parallel the theory of management and that of politics, economics and history, we see that they are two similar branches of the same subject" (p. 16 of the French translation, *Machiavelli et les princes de l'entreprise*, Robert Laffont, 1968).

With chapter headings such as "The King and the Barons", "The Successor", "Risk-taking and Self-Control" and "The Principle of Self-Interest", we quickly realise the shift that is taking place between Machiavelli's thought and the practices of liberal entrepreneurship. Admittedly, Machiavelli is used here as a pretext for linking the world of business and politics, and we learn nothing new from this book; but such an approach nonetheless reveals certain links between capitalism and the Renaissance. Commenting on the passage about the colonies in ch. III of *The Prince*, Jay reformulates Machiavelli's thinking as follows: "The fundamental rule is that, in revived affairs, the former rulers must either be warmly encouraged or dismissed; eliminated, they are powerless; demoted, they unite and try to regain their status quo ante. [...] Since I read this passage, I have advised this attitude to several bosses who had an absorption on their hands; they have all adopted it". (p. 20)

What is it to say? Companies are not the only field in which Machiavelli's method, observations and principles of action can be taken up: as soon as there is a group with a leader at its head, the analogy of

situations makes it possible. Corporate Machiavellianism nonetheless gives the impression of a sandbox game, for the reason that where there are no people there are no politics. A company's employees can be made redundant at any time; not a people.

Another line of convergence between the Renaissance and capitalism is historical: the Medici built their power on their banking business, during a proto-capitalist 15th century that saw the creation of many other fortunes (the Fuggers in Germany, for example). Joining forces to cope with cargo losses at sea and pirate attacks, the shipowners of Genoa, Venice and Florence (via Pisa, which provided access to the Mediterranean sea) inaugurated the principle of insurance and risk management. The Medici understood this dynamic better than others and set up trading posts from Naples to Bruges and from London to Geneva, circulating money and lending to merchants, princes and popes alike. Florence was to become their fiefdom, first in the 15th century under Cosimo the Elder and then Lorenzo the Magnificent, and then again in the 16th century, after the Medici took back Florence with the help of one of their creditors, Pope Julius II. This control was confirmed in 1568 when another Cosimo became Grand Duke of Tuscany with the blessing of Pius V, in return for a promise to place his fleet at the service of the Holy League.

Machiavelli was born at a time when the Medici were climbing up the ladder, and the year of his birth (1469) coincided with the accession to power of Lorenzo, known for his patronage, which emptied the city's coffers. What rivers of tourists go to admire in Florence today dates from this period: from the *Duomo* designed by Brunelleschi with the support of Cosimo the Elder, to the many works exhibited at the *Uffizi* (Da Vinci, Botticelli, Lippi, Michelangelo, etc.) and paid for by Lorenzo or his friends, bearing witness to the way in which the Medici gradually forged their own identity (a class identity) and used this economic and symbolic power to attain political power (the famous expression "*de facto* prince").

Machiavelli was well aware of this, writing a chapter in *The Prince* devoted to liberality and parsimony. In it, he half-heartedly criticises the Medici: "if a prince wants to maintain his reputation for generosity among men, it is necessary for him not to neglect any possible means of sumptuous display; in so doing, such a prince will always use up all his resources in such displays" (ch. XVI) On the one hand, maintaining such a spending regime leads princes to increase taxes, making them odious to their subjects. On the other hand, Lorenzo de' Medici's magnificence kept him so busy that he forgot about the dangers outside, against which, rather than indulging in the *eros* of triumphant humanism, it would have been better to be prepared: proof of this is the way in which the city of Florence fell into the hands of Charles VIII in 1494 without his having had to fight a battle.

It is again at the end of chapter XXI that Machiavelli raises the question of patronage: "A prince should also demonstrate that he is a lover of the virtues, by giving hospitality to virtuous men and by honouring those who excel in a particular skill." He thought it would be useful to introduce a system of rewards to encourage "anyone who thinks of making his city or state greater". And in keeping with Roman tradition – *panem et circenses* – he advised "keeping the populace occupied with festivals and spectacles". The prince also participates in this in his own way, since he must "offer himself as an example of humanity and munificence while always, nevertheless, firmly maintaining the majesty of his dignity". Private and public patronage, official artists (Vasari, etc.), political show – Machiavelli was no doubt hardly an innovator, and here we see him echoing the practices of his time, when a new social class, the bourgeoisie, was experiencing a meteoric rise.

If we follow the course of history up to the present day, we cannot fail to make a passing reference to Marx's philosophy, comparing the two humours of Chapter IX with the two classes articulated by capitalist relations of production. The people and the greats, the proletarians and the bourgeois: those who have nothing and don't want to be oppressed, and those who have everything and want to oppress and command the others. Another question in passing: has this situation been fundamentally altered by the emergence of the middle class? Or is the middle class simply the consequence of the imperialism of the great powers and the predation of Western capitalism? Another question is how to interpret the widening gap between the richest 1%, who in 2024 own 43% of the world's wealth, and the remaining 99%.

In a mix of effectual truth and English-style utilitarianism, liberalism and neo-liberalism can then be discussed through the practices of transnational companies in a globalised world. The neo-feudalism of power relationships within the private sector, but also in those of the underground economy. And at the geopolitical level, what are we to make of nuclear lords, vassal states and proxy wars? What is the place of international law in such conditions? The law that originated with the Greeks and Romans and in which Machiavelli took such little interest...

Our attention could finally turn to the emergence of the lords of tech, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and co. For some years now, there has been talk of techno-feudalism: digital platforms are replacing markets. Yannis Varoufákis, a self-defined libertarian Marxist, puts it this way: "Capitalist profits (in the sense of entrepreneurial profits understood by Adam Smith and Marx) are disappearing, while new forms of rent are accumulating in the accounts of techno-lords controlling both the state and digital fiefdoms, in which unpaid or precarious labour is performed by the masses, who are beginning to resemble techno-peasants." (*On techno-feudalism*, 2022[34]). And all the while, he analyses, it is the central banks that keep the economy going by creating money, incessantly since the *subprime* crisis in 2008.

So, is *The Prince* a recipe for success in the age of neo-techno-feudalism? It's true that the philanthropism of the 'greats' in the tech world colours their stranglehold on energy and data to feed *Big Data*, but deception and cunning are not Machiavelli's prerogative. In truth, to be Machiavellian, one would still have to be involved in politics, in other words, take the risk of playing a game open to anyone; and this is of course not the case with capitalist enterprise, framed by the state laws that protect it and the networks of co-optations that isolate it from 'the people'. From Machiavelli's point of view, capitalism is the crushing of the people by the great, a situation of imbalance of humours within the body politic that cannot continue indefinitely. Of all those who have read Machiavelli – Marx or Mussolini, Gramsci, Macron, Elon Musk – each undoubtedly draws the lessons that resemble them.

7. Making history: a mereology

What happens to all the stories we tell? Do they blend together, form a whole, produce an unconscious, a kind of creature with a thousand heads that participates in the unfolding of our temporality as historical beings?

[34] https://journals.openedition.org/variations/2290, 11.8.2024.

Machiavelli insists on this point: when acquiring a new state, a prince must take care to make it "*tutto un corpo*" with those already in his government. And I read again his *Florentine Histories* and speculate: is the same thing true of stories? Does every new book written by an author get embodied in the all-encompassing book of his or her life – of our lives?

Mereology is the science of the whole and the parts. Based on Aristotelian principles, it was developed during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But right now I'd like to get away from philosophy. I'm not sure, as the 'prince of philosophers' wrote, that the part exists prior to the whole. Twenty-five centuries later, Deleuze and Guattari would no doubt have said something like: the whole and the parts are contemporary with each other to the extent of the intensity that runs through them, which means that the whole never ceases to transform itself – not like a greedy mass that incorporates part after part, but like a chimera whose form and disposition change according to who is looking at it, generating a singular potential for action each time.

Let's go back in the other direction: from the mereology of *Mille Plateaux* to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, only six centuries but a whole new way of making history. In 1980, they preferred the rhizome to the tree, and operated by folding partial textualities, so much so that no one has ever read *Mille Plateaux* in its entirety. In 1350, the *Decameron* consisted of a hundred stories stuffed into the skin of a ten-day-old duck, but we don't know whether these feathers allowed it to fly away or whether at the end it was plucked from its skin, turned on a spit and tasted.

Boccaccio is right there. He's sitting on a stump, a tree that's just been cut down, in the little wood that belongs to the Machiavelli family, not far from Sant'Andrea in Percussina (I've been there once, I went by bus, wandered around the deserted village, then a thunderstorm broke out and I nearly got hit by a bolt of lightning, "that was close" as they say, I just ended up soaking wet. On the way back to Florence there was a wet dog in the bus, that was me). So Boccaccio is sitting on a stump. Machiavelli has fallen asleep on the grass after his work, and Boccaccio tells him a story, one of the hundred stories in the *Decameron*. To relax someone like Machiavelli, you need something like Tancredi and Ghismonda. Do you know about it? Tancredi the father wants his daughter to marry into the nobility, so Ghismonda marries, but her husband dies hunting, and she becomes a widow, and back in her father's house. That's where things go wrong, because she falls in love with a page, Guiscardo. As fate would have it, they meet in secret... but the father catches them. Tancredi's reaction reminds me of Zeus in the myth by Aristophanes: he is so afraid of the power of love that he has the page killed and serves his heart to his daughter on a plate. A silver plate. Ghismonda's words about refusing to give up on love are among the most beautiful in all literature. As he listens to Boccaccio tell his story, Machiavelli thinks about the two humours of society: the people and the greats. He was well aware that these two do not mix easily. You don't become an alchemist (or Hephaestus) overnight. Nonetheless, the two lovers took the plunge, they dared, the folly of youth no doubt, unless the fault lies in a merry-go-round of fortune, a test for anyone willing to undertake it. And if it fails for these two, it succeeds for a thousand others, in other places, in other times. Fascinating how all the characters play their parts to perfection, and how the result is a failure that has all the makings of a success. La *malignità di fortuna* is a fabulous counterpoint.

And with the counterpoint, we're right in the middle of Baroque music. Did you know that Machiavelli wrote poems? One of them was set to music by Philippe Verdelot: *O dolce nocte* (you can find it on Youtube). This poem is in fact an interlude from his play *La Mandragola*, written around 1518 and first performed in 1526, on which he and Verdelot collaborated. This is no longer Ghismonda and Guiscardo, it's Molière *avant la lettre*, a farce, neither silly nor nasty, just an anticlerical miscreant's farce.

When you're writing a story, there's always a question at some point of how you're going to make it stand up, "on its own" so to speak, just as a book seems to stand up on its own, a small sum of magic held between a cover and a back that needs to be leafed through and aired from time to time. The counterpoint helps to hold the song together. As *la malignità di fortuna*, to hold together the story of our disappointments. It's when you're used to being sad that you're most likely to be a clown, isn't it? A king needs a jester. Or as Nietzsche put it: every philosopher needs a poet.

So, in the age of storytelling, where are our jesters and poets? What stories can relieve us of the categorical imperative, control society and consumerist narcissism? What stories can we tell that will allow us to take a step aside from incitement, assignment, injunction, censorship and the rest of them? How do we tell our stories today, how do we make history out of everything that the media spew forth, out of all the positions we take on social networks? In the face of the acceleration of society theorised by Hartmut Rosa, is it enough to create resonance to hold everything together? But not in a straight line. Perhaps in a circle. The great story is over anyway. That was the lesson Frank Herbert drew at the end of *God Emperor of Dune*: we have entered the Age of Dispersion.

To escape global warming, a group of ten young people have moved to the countryside. They're doing a technology detox, and to stop the cops listening in, they've put their mobile phones in the fridge. And every day, while they wait for things to calm down, they tell each other stories...

8. Machiavelli and astrology

Fortune is a concept commonly used in the Middle Ages, during the Renaissance and right up to the dawn of modernity. From Dante to Descartes, via Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan and the poets of the Pléiade, there is a whole range of literature, philosophy and popular beliefs to study. It would lead us to examine the role of astrology – the twelve segments of the wheel and the planets that move within them – at a time when it was competing with Christian Providence on the one hand, and with the ancient sense of destiny on the other, at the crossroads of Greek and Latin, Chaldean, Christian and Arab-Muslim cultures.

The question that interests me here is a specific one: can a political thought, that of Machiavelli, which operates within a vision of the cosmos inherited from Aristotle and Ptolemy, still have something to tell us after Copernicus, Galileo, Newton and Einstein? Is Machiavelli's thinking so tainted by geocentrism that we must invalidate his conclusions, even though he seems to care so little about cosmology? In his book *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (1992), Anthony J. Parel denies the relevance of Machiavelli's work on the grounds that its anthropological and cosmological premises are outdated. But isn't this taking Thomas Kuhn's thesis on scientific paradigms too literally?

I agree with Parel on one point: unlike Leo Strauss, I do not see Machiavelli as a 'modern' with a desire to control luck. But whereas Parel rejects this modernity on the grounds that Machiavelli remains anchored in the Aristotelian cosmos and determines political action by reference to a fortune coloured by astrology, I reject it because I do not find in Machiavelli a desire to control luck: rather, he invites us to come to terms with it. Dealing with luck is something that human beings have been doing for thousands of years; the first traces of a science that interprets the stars date back at least 5,000 years, so there's no paradigm shift here. I would go even further: Machiavelli is not a modern because

modernity is a historical category resulting from a perspective from which the observer claims to be absent. Yet in his way of looking at history, of telling it, of making it, Machiavelli situates his knowledge: there is no fortune except in relation to a virtù, just as there is no text except in relation to a reader.

If I dispute Parel's thesis as to the invalidity of Machiavelli's thought in a modern context, it is also because I dispute his interpretation of astrology. Yes, Machiavelli uses the notion of the *quality of the times*, yes, he resorts to the advice of astrologers, but he does not use it literally. Rather, his notions of fortune and the quality of the times serve an experimental approach to historical development. Indeed, if the quality of the times is a matter for interpretation, astrologers are no exception: their interpretations of the movement of the stars are only systematic in terms of the interpretative opportunities they seize. In other words, it is necessary for *events* to be perceived *as such* for astrologers to be able to interpret them and, on the basis of these interpretations, to make projections towards future events, thus determining pending opportunities for interpretation. Astrologers thus find themselves in the wake of the effectual truth that affects them, and at the heart of discursive effects that produce a narrative when, and only when, subsequent events help to validate it. The rest is quickly forgotten, just as the weather forecast is forgotten when the desired weather arrives. And by the way, how many events are invisible as such, absolved of any historicity?

From this observation, I conclude that astrology does not need to be an exact science, that this is not in fact its purpose. The knowledge it can offer is knowledge in motion, movement. It is written on water. It is a science of images drawn on Heraclitean rivers.

When modernity denies astrology the title of 'science', it is applying its own criteria without putting itself into perspective. Modernity cannot escape becoming, but the form it has invented for itself by moving into zenithal time claims to. It was Leonardo Da Vinci in 1502, drawing the map of Imola, the first map "seen from the sky". Later, Copernicus and Galileo modifying the cosmic perspective by rediscovering the heliocentrism of Aristarchus of Samos. Matter stopped falling towards the centre of the Earth, as Aristotle had thought, and was soon held in orbit around the Sun by the force of gravity. Later came aeroplanes, then satellites, and the illusion produced by technology that life is entirely measurable, calculable and objectifiable. An illusion, because, as Machiavelli put it so well, the people look at/to the prince as much as the prince looks at/to the people; but an effective illusion. Donna Haraway has called it "the conquering gaze from nowhere": this way of playing God through the intercession of technical means aimed at mastering and possessing a nature artificially separated from the human agent who contemplates it.

So is astrology a 'pseudo-science'? As if all knowledge were not always waiting to be surpassed, and as if inaccuracy were not a sign of all that we do not know.

The Renaissance was one of those moments when, because the dominant interpretations seemed to be failing, a suspension of the reign of the literal made it possible for magic and science, poetry and philosophy, to live in concert. At such times, the meaning of language as metaphor is clearer and more alive. But this did not last long, and the force of the reaction was devastating. Giordano Bruno was able to infer that there were countless planets inhabited by other forms of life: the Inquisition burnt him at the stake. In this way, the Church of Rome and the imperialist powers of Europe denied minds the freedom to think and imagine, just as they abolished the ability of non-white and non-Christian peoples to self-determine.

So let's allow ourselves to be intrigued by our relationship with ancient beliefs, and let go of our certainties for a moment, make some space in our minds. How is it that, some 5000 years after its first appearance in Mesopotamia, we still use astrology today as a tool of knowledge, we who 'know' all about the precession of the equinoxes? The first known traces of literary writing also date from 5000 years ago... but then: what is the effectiveness of a story, a narrative, a vision of the cosmos?

Speaking of contemporary uses of astrology, Alice Sparkly Kat wrote in 2021: "A lot of people, whether they're millennials or boomers, white or other, queer or cisnormal, have told me they were first attracted to astrology because it seems to offer a way to talk among ourselves about ourselves without having to address the trappings of identity. Rather than talking about ourselves within the typical categories of race, gender, and class, people want to build community around identities that feel authentic and close. Astrology fans want identity to be as complex as humanity. (*Post-colonial astrology*, p. 9) If we exist in a *vis-à-vis* with fortune, isn't it obvious that its rivers flow through us as well, that we are to ourselves both the colours and the wheel? Is it not time, then, to plunge our hands into these images?

Alice Sparkly Kat devotes her book to the question of symbolic content inherited from Greek and especially Roman antiquity: for example, what it means today to say that the constellation Sagittarius is ruled by Jupiter, and that Jupiter is a planet symbolising expansion and sovereignty. Mars, a warrior planet? Does this mean that there will always be war? What do we mean by 'war'? Is Venus a 'feminine' planet? How do these ancient symbols play into our history, and how do we integrate the meaning of history into the way we understand and orient these symbols, into our interpretations?

9. Waiting for chance

Between fortune and astrology, the concept of *qualità dei tempi* is linked to the so-called 'chronocrates' planets, which determine the point at which a particular action should be carried out in a particular way. But as soon as we understand fortune from this perspective, the dimension that makes it a dispenser of chance is removed, or even cancelled out. If it is the movement of the planets that determines the quality of the time, then there is no such thing as chance: fortune ceases to be blind when astrologers lend it their eyes and their language. Of course, it is not 'exact', as all astrologers know – but it is 'inclined', 'coloured', determining a spectrum in the realm of accident.

I maintain, however, that Machiavelli does not renounce chance, that is to say, in its liminal form, a principle of indeterminacy lodged at the heart of becoming. This is the meaning of his quasi-metaphysics, which in no way prevents him from making use of astrology in a pragmatics of momentum that knows how the invention of a story is concomitant with the role we want to play in it. For the Florentine, the meaning of history is always at stake; the seriousness of existence, its necessity, is to be sought on the side of effectual truth. Thus fortune remains unpredictable, nature's bulwark against all transcendence.

But it is also politically that the unpredictability of fortune interests me, in that it seems to establish itself as a rule of egalitarian distribution. Egalitarian, because anyone can win at a game of chance, because anyone can be called upon to play a role that the previous course of events did not allow for. And since politics is a human property, anyone can experience success and defeat. This is the meaning

of the address of *The Prince*, when Machiavelli says that he wants to write "something useful for everyone who understands it" (ch. XV): princes and commoners, old or young, women or men, Aries, Cancer, Scorpio or Capricorn, it doesn't matter. From the moment you enter the game, an element of chance is also involved. The conditions of the game are therefore not entirely fixed, fortune being at the root of the chance interjections that make its future obscure.

There is a precedent for chance in politics: Athenian democracy. Among the citizens of Athens, administrative offices were distributed by the drawing of lots, in order to prevent the powerful and lineages from controlling the government of the State. The role of chance must nevertheless be clarified by remembering that citizens were a minority of the population: only males of Athenian parentage and landowners were citizens. In other words, chance was confined to a very narrow circle of co-optation... a reality that the contemporary idealisation of Athenian democracy as the forerunner of Western "democracies" generally overlooks.

In *La haine de la démocratie*, Jacques Rancière also seems to overlook this fact in his discussion of the role of chance in classical Greece and beyond. Nonetheless, he conducts a very detailed analysis of the dynamics of equality and inequality in this context, focusing in particular on Plato's strategies for undoing democracy by limiting the domain of chance (see the chapter entitled "La politique ou le pasteur perdu"). Limiting, not eliminating, because although for Plato good government, the only form of justice, must be placed in the hands of philosophers, it cannot do without a certain amount of chance, since chance makes it possible to question – and to set in motion – any legitimisation of power (by age, social origin, strength or knowledge), a questioning of which the philosopher is also the agent and the product.

In the famous myth of Er that closes *The Republic*, Plato's use of chance is unmistakable. Following their deaths, the souls are guided to the throne of Necessity. Necessity is surrounded by her daughters, the Moirai, dressed in white, their heads crowned with strips, Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos, who spins, weaves and cuts the threads of individual lives. What follows is a two-stage process. First of all, a proclaimer casts spells before the souls present to determine the order in which each will pass on; then, according to this random order, each soul chooses the life it wishes to lead in its next incarnation:

> A proclaimer placed them in a certain order, then, taking spells and models of life from the lap of Lachesis, he climbed the steps of a high platform and declared: "Word of the virgin Lachesis, daughter of Necessity. Ephemeral souls, this is the beginning of a new cycle that will bring death to a mortal race. It is not a demon who will draw lots for you, but you who will choose a demon. Let the first to be drawn be the first to choose the life to which he will be bound by necessity. No one is the master of virtue; each person, depending on whether he honours it or despises it, will receive a greater or lesser share of it. Responsibility lies with the person who chooses. The god is not responsible.
>
> With these words, he cast the spells on all of them, and each one picked up the one that had fallen near him, except Er himself, who was not allowed to do so. And when each had picked up his spell, he clearly knew the rank he had been given to choose from. After that, he went on to place before them, spread out on the ground, the models of life, the number of which far exceeded that of the souls present. There were all sorts.

Echoing Socrates' dictum that "the unexamined life is not worth living", and reducing the role of chance to a strict minimum, Plato emphasises the choice of a life rather than the equalising role of

chance. Lots are only drawn to decide the order of passage, but this is of secondary importance given the number of lives available.

Things are different in Machiavelli, since we do not choose our life, but find ourselves caught up in a singular concordat with the quality of the times (the expression "*concordiano insieme*", ch. XXV). What we are able to choose – and insofar as we wish to take the risk of Fortune – are only the opportunities that we make our own, opportunities magnetised by our character and our habits (cf. the example of Julius II in ch. XXV, who according to Machiavelli would not have been able to change his ways of acting, being old and having followed the same method all his life). While Plato and Machiavelli agree on the idea that choosing well is the hallmark of wisdom, they differ on the conditions of choice.

For Plato, having to choose is imposed on us, and everything happens, in the image proposed by the myth, before we are born: a way of saying that it is possible, for the contemplative, to extract himself from life and evaluate it without this choice being tainted by interest. The non-philosophical soul therefore aims to satisfy its desires, resulting either in a bad choice (tyranny) or a choice that in any case does not lead to the best choice (the philosophical life). For Machiavelli, on the other hand, our choices (in the plural) are exercised at the whim of the flows of fortune in which we are caught; so that if we do not choose, other forces "choose" for us, which are not only our passions but also and above all social and political forces.

The same difference can be seen in the question of the desire to govern. Unlike Plato, for whom government must be entrusted to the philosopher insofar as he does not desire power, for Machiavelli the desire for power plays an essential role and is part of a conception of action that envelops interest. For the Florentine, there is no such thing as a judgement that is not coloured by interest, and any philosophy that claims the contrary would focus "on the image we have of things" rather than on their reality, on the way "we should live" rather than on the way we live (ch. XV), an idealistic philosophy that leads individuals and governments to ruin.

That there is no possible position of exteriority implies that wisdom is not the fruit of disinterested contemplation, but of interest grappling with itself, since only interest experiencing its own effectiveness can learn to know itself, in the face of situations as diverse as fortune will present them. The immanence of the Machiavellian choice is thus ensured, it would seem, by the 50/50 nature of our relationship with fortune, where it is not a question of negotiation between agencies, but of an agreement formulated as to the conditions of the action. Whether we are talking about a new prince or a prince by heredity, struggles within a republic or a situation of anomie, each time the situation pits individuals against each other who are taking the risk of initiative and self-determination in the face of an indeterminate sum of chance that may be favourable or unfavourable to them – a sum of which they themselves are a part. Machiavelli believes that it is at moments of transition from one time to another that the question of choice reaches its critical threshold of intensity in determining the future: it is at such moments that virtù as a measure of a face-to-face encounter with fortune emerges; at such moments when fortune is most mutable, that the relationship with unpredictability reveals the freedom of action of which an agent – individual or collective – is capable.

What is at stake, then, is the determination of freedom. A freedom that is not a given, but the result of the exercise of virtù in its immanent dialogue with fortune.

Online resources

1. Machiavelli's writings

Various works by Machiavelli on Project Gutenberg (web), in English, German and Italian.

Works by Machiavelli on Wikisource (web) in Italian, French and English.

Works by Machiavelli on the Internet Archive (web) in Italian, English, etc.

2. Related texts

De Pictura by Leon Battista Alberti (web), "the window that opens onto the story".

The History of Rome by Titus Livius, on The Internet Archive.

The Histories by Polybius.

The Republic by Cicero, on Project Gutenberg.

De Rerum Natura by Lucretius, on Project Gutenberg.

Dante's texts on Project Gutenberg.

Plato's *Republic*, on Project Gutenberg.

History of the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides, on Project Gutenberg.

Tetrabiblos by Claudius Ptolemy.

3. Prefaces, articles, notices, etc.

Monsieur Machiavelli ou le cœur humain dévoilé (pdf in French), Preface by Jean Giono to *Toutes les lettres de Machiavelli*, nrf Gallimard, Paris, 1955.

Extracts from Nietzsche (pdf) writing about Machiavelli, the Renaissance and Cesare Borgia, in French.

Biographical note on *Treccani.it* (web) by Giorgio Inglese, in Italian.

Entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (web).

My notes on extracts from The *Prince* (pdf).

4. Videos, podcasts, etc.

Histoire des pouvoirs en Europe occidentale, XIIIe-XVIe siècle, all Patrick Boucheron's lectures at the Collège de France 2015-2025, audio/video, in French.

L'art de gouverner à Florence (1494-1530), Jean-Claude Zancarini's lectures on video, from Savonarola to Guicciardini and Machiavelli of course. 2007, in French.

Machiavelli's *Prince*, 4 episodes of the programme *Les Chemins de la philosophie* on France Culture, hosted by Géraldine Mosna-Savoye, with Sandro Landi, Thierry Ménissier, Vincent Martigny and Agnès Cugno. 2022, in French.

Un été avec Machiavel by P. Boucheron, 30 episodes of 4 minutes on France Inter, 2016, in French.