

GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING: ARISTOTLE AND MACHIAVELLI ON MIXED GOVERNMENT*

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Summary: The article proposes a joint reading of Aristotle's and Machiavelli's conceptions of mixed government. It brings out the shared understandings of political life that inform their work and asks why they end up proposing diametrically opposed modes of government. The article relates this divergence to differences in how they view the relationship between citizens and polity. The article documents these differences in a comparison of Aristotle's and Machiavelli's conceptions of war and relates Machiavelli's doctrine to developments in late medieval reflection on civil order. In conclusion, the article interrogates Machiavelli's programmatic intention on returning political thought to its origin and concludes that his understanding of agency does not allow him to recover or reconnect to Aristotle.

For centuries few would have imagined that we would one day be using the work of Niccolò Machiavelli to shed light on democracy. And yet, this is what Mogens Herman Hansen did in his later years where the question of democracy moved to the forefront of his preoccupations. Machiavelli – not the cunning counselor of *The Prince* but the disabused republican of the *Discourses on Livy* – offered him a picture of democracy that was truer and more alive than that of liberal theory.¹ It is not surprising that Machiavelli's grandiose attempt to recover the lessons of Roman republicanism would appeal to an eminent ancient historian like Hansen. Still, the distance that separates the Florentine from Aristotle, who remained a lodestar for Hansen throughout his career, intrigues, enough to invite the enquiry that we shall undertake. We propose to use the theme of the mixed constitution, which Hansen studied in depth in relation to both

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1 Hansen 2007: 67–68; 2017: 47–49

thinkers, as a way to measure the distance between them, and in the process, examine how the position one occupies in history conditions the attempt to recover what is past.

Almost two millennia apart, Aristotle and Machiavelli both work through a typology that divides the constitutions into three good (monarchy, aristocracy, democracy) and three bad forms (tyranny, oligarchy, mob rule), and both find that ultimately, the constitutional ordering of the polity is determined by the opposition between the few that have and the many that do not. But despite the similarity in how they frame the question of the constitution, and in what they see behind it, they come to very different conclusions. Aristotle transcended constitutional analysis in the direction of a moderate middle position, around which he proposed to resolve social conflict. Machiavelli insisted on the inevitability, indeed desirability, of social conflict. It is this divergence of outcome that we want to elucidate. The first part sets up the comparison between Aristotle and Machiavelli. We show how Machiavelli relates constitutional ordering to a choice between Roman expansionism and Greek autarchy. As we shall show, the push towards imperial expansion is tied to an inability to resolve social conflict *within* the polity. We look for causes of this inability in the second part. We argue that a reconfiguration of government around the protection of the polity blinds Machiavelli to the social differences and distinctions contained in the citizen body, and so render him unable to find a point of anchorage for a moderate middle position. The analysis is continued in the third part where we situate Machiavelli's perspectival blindness to the past in the history of attempts to recover Aristotle. We shall show that what prevents Machiavelli from recovering the past is a desire to invest the present with the force that made it great.

1. From Six to Two

At no point does Aristotle formally introduce the six-fold typology of constitutions.² It frames his disposition of the extensive empirical data that makes up his *Politics*. The six-fold typology is never abandoned, but

2 On the history of the typology, see Bleicken 1979, especially 160-62; Nippel 1980.

as the different layers of the work reveal, he gradually develops a different understanding of political reality that the typology does not capture. Constitutional forms are no longer seen as discrete configurations of offices and powers but as different instantiations or figures (εἶδη) of a fundamental constitutional binary that opposes democracy and oligarchy.

It follows therefore that there are as many forms of constitution as there are modes of arrangement according to the superiority of the parts. But the forms mostly are thought to be two – just as in the case of the winds we speak of some as north and some as south and regard the rest as deviations from these, so also of constitutions there are held to be two forms, democracy and oligarchy. Men reckon aristocracy as a sort of oligarchy because it is oligarchy of a sort, what is called constitutional government (πολιτείαν) as democracy just as in the case of the winds they reckon the west wind as a kind of north wind and the east wind as a kind of south wind. [...] For the most part therefore they are accustomed to think in this way about the constitutions; but it is truer and better to class them as we did, and assuming that there are two well-constructed forms, or else one, to say that the others are deviations, some from the well-blended constitution and the others from the best one, the more tense and masterful constitutions being oligarchic and the relaxed and soft ones democratic.³

Aristotle invests a political metaphor – the constitutions as the southern and northern wind – with a new meaning. Where the idea of contrary winds focuses attention on difference, he embeds that difference in a spectrum. Constitutions are seen as points of crystallisation between two constitutional extremes (democracy/oligarchy) that Aristotle links to the opposition of rich and poor. The telescoping of this economic binary onto the idea of a constitutional spectrum provides the basis for the development of a series of strategies to maintain equilibrium between the parts of the *polis*. These strategies are presented in chapter 9 of the first

3 Arist. *Pol.* 1290a11–30 (transl. from Rackham 1998). For an analysis of Aristotle's reduction of constitutional plurality, see Hansen 2013: 98–99.

book of the *Politics*, and include remuneration for juror duty, the imposition of fines for absenteeism, the use of sortition to distribute offices, and property requirements for holding public office. The ideal towards which these strategies tend, and the test of whether they have been successful, is that the polity can be described indifferently as an oligarchy and a democracy.⁴ As Aristotle notes, the *politeia* constitution, which combines elements from the other constitutions, is the species that more than any other realises what is common to them all, which is why the term proliferates in the *Politics* as he extends its meaning to cover the other well-constructed forms.⁵

This method of constructing a mixed constitution by combining elements or practices from different and sometimes competing regimes proceeds on the intuition that ultimately, the nature of a polity is determined by the balance of power that obtains between the factions that compete for a share, or a greater share, in the government of the polity. We might say that constitutional classification expresses the presumptive primacy of a specific faction, and we should not be surprised that the concern with constitutional balancing carries over into a concern with the social substrate of political stability. If constitutional mutation is caused by shifts in the balance of power within the polity, combining elements and practices from the involved parties will contain conflict but will not resolve it. In addition to this approach, Aristotle develops another approach that goes beyond containment. The second approach does not focus simply on the relative strength of the different factions of the *polis*, or the truth of the claims they make to justify their bid for power. Instead, he connects political instability to the unilateral nature of the conceptions of government that the competing factions advance. Each wants to remake the *polis* in its own image, to the exclusion of all others. As a result, there is no-one to represent the viewpoint of the *polis*. This is what Aristotle wants to create: a citizen segment that can occupy the space between factions.⁶

4 Arist. *Pol.* 1294b13, 15.

5 Arist. *Pol.* 1294b11, 1307a7–16 (aristocracy); 1297b24–25 (democracy).

6 On this point, I refer to the analysis in Lev 2008: 121–25.

Underlying this second approach is an intuition that ultimately, political conflict reduces to the binary opposition of democracy and oligarchy. If that is so, conflict can be resolved by strengthening, or creating, an intermediary segment, the members of which have enough that their actions are not determined by want, but not enough to constitute a polar opposite to the *demos*. Where this middle segment is small, the extremes – the rich and the *demos* – will conduct the affairs of the *polis* according to their own interests. They will deviate from the middle and transform the *polis* into an oligarchy or a democracy. Where the middle is strong, it acts as a supplement to the constitutionalist strategy of combining elements drawn from different regimes. We see how Aristotle envisages the deployment of the two approaches in book V of the *Politics* where he considers how to address political instability that is caused by letting some factions in the *polis* prosper more than others:

And the way to avert this is to always entrust the affairs (πράξεις) and the offices to the opposite segments (I mean that the men of quality are opposite to the many, and the poor to the wealthy), and to endeavour to mix the multitude of the poor and that of the wealthy or to increase the middle (τὸ μέσον) (for this dissolves party factions due to inequality).⁷

In describing the two strategies (institutional/sociological), Aristotle does not explicitly juxtapose them as to their effect, but the fact that only the mixing of rich and poor and strengthening of the middle is said to dissolve, rather than merely contain, party factions shows that he is aware that the strengthening of the middle invests political space in a different way. It is the movement towards an incarnate middle that we do not find in Machiavelli's work, despite his attention to the material conditions of government, and despite his acute awareness of the need to intercept social discontent.

Unlike Aristotle, Machiavelli refers to the six-fold typology as a theorem, which he introduces in the context of a succinct exposé of Polybius' theory of constitutional mutations.⁸ Polybius hides behind the reference

7 Arist. *Pol.* 1308b25–31 (transl. from Rackham 1998 (modified)).

8 The theory that Machiavelli references is expounded in *Plb.* 6.3.1–9.14.

to “wiser men [who] hold the opinion that there are six kinds of government”: three bad and three good joined in a cycle, which begins with kingship as the distress of living scattered like beasts drive men to subjugate themselves to a king so as to better defend themselves. As Hansen notes, Machiavelli does not actually make analytical use of the six-fold typology.⁹ No sooner is it introduced than it is abandoned. At the same time as Machiavelli affirms that this circle (*cerchio*) is one that all republics past and present must pass, he goes on to reveal the existence of a binary opposition of social forces that the Roman republic found a way to intercept and contain in a mixed constitution:

And fortune was so fortunate to Rome that although this city passed from a government of kings and aristocrats to a government of the people, through the same steps and for the same reasons that were discussed above, the kingly authorities none the less was never entirely abandoned to give authority to the aristocrats, nor was the authority of the aristocrats completely diminished in order to give it to the people, but since this authority remained mixed, it created a perfect republic, and Rome came to this perfection through the discord between the plebeians and the senate ...¹⁰

What we see here is the emergence of a mixed constitution, one that revolves around a social opposition very much like the one identified by Aristotle. Machiavelli does not define the concept of mixity but clearly understands it as the result of a competition of forces that hold each in check without cancelling each other out.¹¹ Mixity enabled the Roman republic to balance the different factions against each other. It did not, however, dissolve or even contain conflict, quite the contrary. What is new here, is not the idea that social conflict was endemic. This was a commonplace in republican theory, although not an uncontested one. The novelty of Machiavelli’s approach lies in his affirmation that social

9 Hansen 2007: 68.

10 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.2.27–28 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

11 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.2.26–27. For an inventory of the irresolvable paradoxes that arise out of the conjunction of the idea of mixity and *anacyclosis*, see Sasso 1986c: 30–37.

conflict was beneficial to the Roman republic: “It appears to me,” he says, “that those who condemn the disturbances (*tumulti*) between the nobles and the plebeians condemn those very things that were the cause of Roman liberty”.¹²

It might seem, then, that Machiavelli has a principled commitment to tumult as a political means of action, which would make him a radical or agonistic democrat, as an influential strain in contemporary political theory holds.¹³ The matter may be more complicated. Machiavelli clearly has reservations about tumults. While they may have brought Rome to perfection, he notes that they only maintained her in that state for little more than three hundred years, from the overthrow of the Tarquins to the rise of the Gracchi, and even then he tells us, as if to excuse himself, that tumults “rarely led to exile and even more rarely to bloodshed”.¹⁴ More importantly, what Machiavelli hopes to achieve from giving free rein to the expression of discontent is more closely linked to territorial expansion than to the constitution of a body politic. In chapter 6 of the first book of the *Discourses*, which asks the crucial question whether the Roman republic could have been governed so as to put an end to tumults, he advocates giving free rein to tumult by reference to its use in mobilising the people for campaigns of conquest. A republic that wants to pursue a policy of territorial expansion will need to follow the example of Rome and “make room for the disturbances and widespread agreement as best one can, because without a large number of well-armed men, no republic will ever be able to grow or, if it does, to maintain itself”.¹⁵

The implication of civil disturbance and territorial expansion already frames the previous chapter, in which Machiavelli considers whether the guardianship (*guardia*) of liberty should be attributed to the nobles or to the plebeians. True to form, he does not define the concept of guardianship but relies on the fairly determinate meaning that the concept had in early sixteenth century humanist publicism where it designated the

12 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.4.29 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

13 For this view, see Abensour 1997; Del Lucchese 2017; McCormick 2011; Negri 2002; Vatter 2000.

14 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.4.29–30 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

15 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.6.36 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

constitutional oversight of government.¹⁶ The question Machiavelli asks involves a juxtaposition of polities: on the one hand, Sparta and Venice where the guardianship lay with the nobles, and on the other, Rome where it lay with the plebeians. At stake in the juxtaposition is more than the attribution of constitutional powers. To Machiavelli, the polities represent competing paradigms for how, and to what ends, a republic should be ordered; should it be ordered for maintaining itself within its boundaries, or should it be ordered towards territorial expansion? Machiavelli has considerable sympathy for the form of government found in Venice and Sparta. We have no reason to doubt his sincerity when he says that if it were possible to organise a republic to remain always within its own boundaries, “the result would be a true republic (*il vero vivere civile*) and true tranquillity in a city”.¹⁷ Chapter IV shows how Sparta and Venice removed the causes of civil disturbance.¹⁸ Machiavelli notes that Rome could have set up as Sparta, but still he sees no alternative to the Roman way. The vicissitudes of human affairs are such that even if a republic could be set up to maintain itself, it would always be at risk of destruction from expansionist adventures it could not handle, which, as Machiavelli notes, proved to be the undoing of both Venice and Sparta.¹⁹

The reasons given by Machiavelli are so closely tied to the examples used that they are presumptive rather than analytical. But they are strong enough to force an unequivocal decision: “I believe it is necessary to follow the political organization of Rome and not that of the other republics, because I cannot believe it is possible to find a middle way between the one alternative and the other, and it is necessary to tolerate the enmities that arose between the people and the senate, taking them as a disadvantage necessary to attain Roman greatness”.²⁰ There is no

16 For an overview of humanist literature, see Pedullà 2018: 118–19.

17 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.6.37 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997 (modified)).

18 Venice did so by reserving government for those who were present at the time of the foundation of the polity, Sparta by instituting an equality of poverty between aristocrats and commoners, which meant that the latter had no reason to fear or to desire power.

19 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.6.37.

20 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.6.38 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

middle way, no middle. It might be objected that Machiavelli is juxtaposing different approaches to what we might call external relations, not different conceptions of political government. Be that as it may, the absence of a middle way shows that Machiavelli cannot carry to its completion a political strategy that much would seem to commit him to. Why does he opt for Roman expansion over Greek autarchy? The answer cannot simply be a commitment to political conflictualism, as Gabriele Pedullà supposes, because to Machiavelli, conflictualism is the price a republic must pay to indulge an imperial drive that itself needs justification. The answer is to be found in a set of causes that implicate all republics in war, leaving imperialism as the only viable option for a republic.

2. The Ways of War

In Aristotle, participation in government is filtered through the institutions of war. He reserves government for those carrying, and able to pay for, hoplite armour.²¹ What most strikes a contemporary reader is not the interface between government and war but how deeply embedded this conception of war is in daily life, how perfectly mundane it is. With a self-evidence we cannot emulate, Aristotle associates war and hunting as means of acquisition, which ties both to the household.²² Other passages confirm that warfare implicates the public and the private in equal measure.²³ In relation to war, man and *polis* move in sync. This synchronicity is kept in place by a community of values, or rather, of virtues that are connected to war:

War compels men to be just and temperate whereas the enjoyment of prosperity and peaceful leisure tends to make them licentious (ὕβρισταί). Therefore much justice and much temperance are needed by those who are thought prosperous and enjoy the things we count

21 Arist. *Pol.* 1297b1-2.

22 Arist. *Pol.* 1256b23-24.

23 Aristotle tells us that while he disapproves of the warlike way of life “for what is private and for what is common to the citizens,” yet it is necessary to seem frightful to the enemy not only when they have entered the territory but also when they have left it (Arist. *Pol.* 1265a25-28 (transl. from Rackham 1998 (modified))).

as blessings, like those that inhabit the happy isles, of which the poets speak. The greater their leisure and their abundance, the more such men will need wisdom, temperance, and justice. From this it is evident that a *polis* which strives for felicity and righteousness must partake of those virtues. It is shameful to fail to make use of the good things in life; it is even more shameful to fail to do so in times of leisure; to show oneself to be a good man in a time of work and war, and no better than a slave in a time of peace and leisure. We must not, therefore, cultivate leisure the way they do in the *polis* of the Lacedaemonians.²⁴

As we see in the above passage, war implicates different aspects of human life, or rather, it implicates different types of excellence. There is excellence in war as there is in peace, and the good man must develop both. But having excellence involves knowing that the activities the two types of excellence concern are not equally valuable. A good man values the activities and virtues of peace higher than those associated with war. This is what the Lacedaemonians, for whom everything reduces to utility or profit, have forgotten. In addition to its ethical function, war serves as a remedy for ills that Aristotle, like Plato, associates with Athenian democracy. War can serve that therapeutic function because the virtues it engages are shared by man and *polis*. Temperance, wisdom, and justice are necessary for man and *polis*, and the reflection on war therefore opens up to all of human life, including the higher pursuits that are connected with peace and leisure. Perhaps more importantly, the ethical conception of war implies that men are equals insofar as the virtues that war inculcates are virtues that all are equally held to develop. Aristotle is aware that waging a war requires leadership, and that military command involves political power. He tells us that commanding the Athenian fleet is like a second kingship.²⁵ But there is no sense that the designation of the commander of the fleet reflects a hierarchy between the involved people that would subsist independently of the conflict.

A different picture emerges from Machiavelli's study of the art of war. The main speaker, Fabrizio Colonna, is a fervent believer in the need to return to the ancient ways in the matter of warfare. One of his opening

24 Arist. *Pol.* 1334a25–40 (transl. from Rackham 1988 (modified)).

25 Arist. *Pol.* 1271a40–42.

reflections, sets the tone: "I say that I have never practised war as my profession, because my profession is to govern my subjects and to defend them, and, in order to defend them, to love peace and to know how to make war. And my king rewards and esteems me not so much because I understand war as because I can also advise him in peace".²⁶ At first blush, this view on war aligns with that of Aristotle. Like the Greek philosopher, Machiavelli sees the art or excellence of war as a necessary but secondary aspect of political life. This is why Colonna, an illustrious general, will not say that he practises war as a profession. War cannot be an end in itself. But where Aristotle makes war an enabling condition of the good life, Machiavelli casts it as an aspect of government. It would take us too far a-field to interrogate the motives of this move from the good life to government. What matters is that the arts mentioned by Colonna engage only those who *govern*. Colonna does not connect them directly to an individual but to a social position. The exclusive focus on the governing subject stands in contrast to Aristotle's idea of a political skill, *phronesis*, which he treats as the apanage of a citizen, every citizen. It is *phronesis* that enables a citizen to be a successful operator in the *polis*, for himself and for his friends, and while Pericles imposed himself as leader in Athens because he had more *phronesis* than anyone else, there is no sense that this elevated him into a higher, category of persons than that of citizen.²⁷

We shall have more to say about the governing subject. What matters here is that its emergence goes hand in hand with a dis-articulation of the figure of the citizen-soldier. In the preface to *The Art of War*, Machiavelli speaks of the ideal soldier as a God-fearing, peace-loving patriot. One could easily construct an argument that these qualities, which make the citizen-soldier an example for all men to follow, imply the existence of the virtues – wisdom, temperance, and justice – that war taught a Greek man, but at no point in the exposition does Machiavelli address the moral personality of those who fight. The only qualities required of a citizen soldier are loyalty and obedience, which enable an army to act with decisive force. This analysis is echoed in the warning that Machia-

26 Machiavelli, *The Art of War* I.104.19 (transl. from Lynch 2003).

27 Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1141b4-16. See Bodéüs 1991: 67-88.

velli issues to the prince against using mercenaries. Mercenaries are useless, indeed dangerous, because they are “disunited, ambitious, undisciplined, and disloyal,” and as they do not keep faith with men, they do not keep faith with God either.²⁸

The fragmentation of political skill into cunning on the one hand and the capacity for obedience on the other carries over into Machiavelli’s response to political crisis. This response takes one of two forms: a wholesale reform of the regime of a corrupted city, or the more or less able manoeuvrings of a *condottiere*.²⁹ In both cases, what is done, is done by an individual who is unbounded by the laws of the city because he must do it all on his own.³⁰ In all other instances, individual agency is at best irrelevant, for the most part, a cause of evil. What corrupts a city is the insistence on acting outside the collective. Such action substitutes personal, or factional, interest for the common good, with the effect of introducing division into the body politic. Once division has been created in a city, orders and laws are not made for the public good but for private interests, which in turn generates new divisions:

Whence it arises that always when one party is driven and one division eliminated, another emerges. For in the city that prefers to maintain itself with sects rather than with laws, as soon as one sect is left there without opposition, it must of necessity divide from within itself, because the city cannot defend itself by those private modes that it had ordered in the first place for its own safety. And that this is true, both the ancient and the modern divisions of our city demonstrate.³¹

Machiavelli succinctly states the self-perpetuating nature of civic division. We see a city destroying itself; we see no individuals, in marked contrast to Aristotle’s *Politics* where the citizen, as we have seen, is no

28 Machiavelli, *The Prince* 12.43 (transl. from Bondanella 2005).

29 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.10.50, I.18.70.

30 Individual citizen are seen as conspirators, so as negative forces, or as obstacles to the reform of a corrupted regime (“... men used to living in one way do not wish to change, and all the more so when they do not see this evil for themselves but must have it demonstrated to them through abstract argument” (Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.18.70 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

31 Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* 3.5.110–11 (transl. from Banfield & Mansfield 1988).

less real and no less distinct a figure than the *polis*. Between the faceless people and the wily prince, the latter has captured the attention of Machiavelli's readers. Where scholars have asked about the distension of the bond between people and prince, they have seen it as a function of the singularisation of the prince through his *virtù*.³² In relation to the question that occupies us here, we need to ask what it is that binds the people so tightly together that any independent action on their part ends up destroying the city. This raises other questions. How, for example, does the insistence on unity align with the analysis of civil disturbance and the Roman Republic? One might object that the one concerns constitutional matters whereas the other concerns military organisation, only Machiavelli explicitly correlates the two, telling us that “where there is good military organization, there must also be good institutions”.³³ It must therefore raise questions about his supposed commitment to political conflictualism when we read that whoever defends a territory must take care that nothing is done “tumultuously and without order; ... And things being ordered thus, tumults that disorder you arise with difficulty”.³⁴

The tension we have brought out between the military and the governmental organisation of a city may be irresoluble. But what is a conundrum is also an answer to the question we asked. If Machiavelli does not complete the turn towards the middle, if he does not throw in his lot with

32 See Senellart 1995: 224–25. For what seems to be a different view, see Pocock 2003: 212–14.

33 Machiavelli, *Discourses* 1.4.29 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997). As James Hankins notes, the significance that Machiavelli attributed to the military organisation of the citizen body would have been perceived as eccentric by his contemporaries, for whom the use of professional mercenary armies was a given (Hankins 2023: 441).

34 Machiavelli, *The Art of War* 7.69–71.149 (transl. from Lynch 2003). Gennaro Sasso has shown how fears that a citizen militia, the creation of which would actuate divisions between the urban poor and the rural population, would be used against the city rendered urgent the question of military discipline (Sasso 1986a: 107–10). These complications, of which Machiavelli was acutely aware as he was drafting the ordinance for a citizen militia, assume a particular urgency for whoever wants to see Machiavelli as a thinker of democracy.

a moderate middle segment, even an idealised one that is yet to be constructed, one answer – no doubt not the only one – is that he cannot. He cannot because, between the prince and the people, there is no-one to turn to, no space to occupy. It is this void that pushed the Roman Republic towards imperialism. It was only in expansion that Rome found a way to release the political tension between rich and poor that beset the republic, as it had the Greek *polis*.³⁵ If Machiavelli opts for Roman expansion over Greek autarchy, it is because of this internal political void. But what prevents Machiavelli from taking the path that Aristotle took? What keeps him from sketching the profile of a middle segment, which he could do by introducing distinctions found elsewhere in his work – distinctions between trades, intermediary bodies, or between humors – into his conceptual construction of the polity? What explains the in-distinction of the citizen body, which is all the more remarkable when held up against the flamboyance of the prince who, as we know, is fox and lion? These questions interest us because whatever the cause of the in-distinction, it is an element of Machiavelli's inability to connect to, and recover, a key aspect of Greek political experience. To understand the nature of this impossibility, we shall ask what it is where the polity came from, and what constitutes its unity. As we pursue these questions, we are led from war to history, and beyond.

3. Ultimate Ends ... and Beginnings

In Machiavelli's work, going back to the beginning – *ridurre verso il principio* – involves a dual movement that discloses, on the one hand, how a thing came about, and on the other, what defines it as the thing it is now. We find the same duality of temporal and conceptual primacy in Aristotle's thinking.³⁶ But if Machiavelli and Aristotle are both aware that the movement towards a principle must address the temporal and the conceptual aspect of the principle, they do so in very different ways in relation to political life. Taking Aristotle first, we might say that in his work,

35 See in this direction Lefort 1986: 553-54.

36 See Arist. *Cat.* 14a24-36. On the differences between the analysis of anteriority in the *Categories* and in the *Metaphysics*, see Aubenque 2013: 44-47.

conceptual definition dominates history. He notes that the *polis* – the first self-sufficient community and so the first that exists with a view to the good life – arises out of more rudimentary, and historically prior, forms of social organisation (*oikos*, village). However, once the *polis* has come into being, its development is driven by the internal dynamics of its constituent elements. This *political* account of the emergence of the *polis* is kept in place by the idea that man is a political being, which cabins off relations of domination (husband/wife, master/slave) within the *oikos* where they are naturalised. What the *polis* is, is not determined by what it developed from. Its pre-political past neither conditions nor intervenes in any way in its operation. The *polis* is anterior in nature to a family and to each of us individually.³⁷

A different relationship to the past informs Machiavelli's reflections on the Roman Republic. This appears when he considers how polities came about:

... in the beginning of the world, when its inhabitants were few, they lived for a time scattered like beasts; then as the generations multiplied they gathered together, and in order better to defend themselves, they began to consider carefully who among them was stronger and braver, and they made him their leader and obeyed him. From this arose knowledge of things honourable and good as opposed to those which are pernicious and evil, for noticing that when someone did harm to his benefactor it aroused hatred and compassion among men, since they condemned the ungrateful and honoured those who showed gratitude, and thinking that the same injuries could also be inflicted upon themselves, they set about making laws in order to avoid similar evils and ordained punishments for whoever violated them: from this arose the knowledge of justice. The result was that later when they had to elect a prince, they did not support the boldest but, instead, the man who was most prudent and just.³⁸

As we see in the passage above, the initial state of the world, a state of scarcity and danger from external attack, leaves an imprint strong

37 Arist. *Pol.* 1253a18–19.

38 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.2.24 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

enough to determine not only the institution of social order but also the nature of its government. People band together under the leadership of one man so as to better defend themselves. In time, physical strength and bravery give way to justice and prudence as the chief virtues of a governing subject, but the discernment of good and bad is so intimately tied up with the relationship of protection (“... for noticing that when someone did harm to his benefactor it aroused hatred and compassion among men ...”) that when men adopt proper government, they stick with the government of one man, although they have in the meantime made laws to regulate social interaction. If monarchy is the first form of government in the constitutional cycle, it is because it is closest to how the world was in the beginning. Aristotle does not rank the six constitutions in order of temporal priority. But in noting that monarchies have become a thing of the past because they require the existence of a socially dominant individual – something his own time with its relative social equality does not provide for –, he situates monarchy in the infancy of government.³⁹ And yet, the explanation he gives for its invention is wholly political and makes no reference to anything that precedes the institution of the *polis*. Kingship, he tells us, was invented to protect the distinguished citizens against the *demos*.⁴⁰ Its origin lies *within* political community and so is political in nature.

In tying the constitution to the beginnings of society, Machiavelli makes the protection of the polity the chief task of government, with the effect of changing the nature of both war and government. We saw how Aristotle was able to integrate war into his theory of political life, in the context of which it served as a remedy for ills that attend on peace and leisure. By tying the existence, and constitutional configuration, of the polity to its capacity to protect its citizens, Machiavelli divests war of its function as a political therapeutic. What is at stake in war is more primordial than civil life. At the same time it is less important, as reflected in the refusal by Fabrizio Colonna to own war as his profession. But if war cannot be allowed to define government, the art of war nevertheless precedes and, in a very basic sense, enables government. The art of war secures the space, over which government reigns. Perhaps surprisingly,

39 Arist. *Pol.* 1313a4-10.

40 Arist. *Pol.* 1310b8-10.

given his reputation, Machiavelli wants to ensure that the influence of the art of war on government did not extend further; that it remain only a condition, and not a component, of government. Maurizio Viroli has shown that he rigorously distinguishes the art of the state, which includes the art of war, from government so as to avoid any contamination.⁴¹ At the same time he admonishes princes that they must have no object and no thought for anything but war, its institutions, and its disciplines; the art of war, he tells us, is the only art befitting one who commands.⁴²

To understand the dis-aggregation of political life, we must place Machiavelli's work against the backdrop of a turn to this present life that takes place in the work of a late medieval thinker like Marsilius of Padua. His recovery of Aristotle's philosophy of the *polis* produces an account that anticipates Machiavelli's theory of government in certain respects. As it did in Aristotle's *Politics*, Marsilius' city emerges out of more rudimentary forms of social organisation, but the search for self-sufficiency, propelled by easing social differentiation, unfolds in a continuous movement.⁴³ The transition from the household to city is gradual, a movement from the less to the more perfect, as Marsilius puts it.⁴⁴ And self-sufficiency, once attained, does not inaugurate the good life as it did in Aristotle, because the good life, the advent of which signalled a conceptual hiatus, is for another time, another life. Living and living well engage man in two modes, one temporal or worldly, the other eternal and heavenly.⁴⁵

Two centuries before Machiavelli resolved to recover the political teachings of antiquity, Marsilius' attempt to return to Aristotle establishes something like a template for a history of civil order where what was present at the outset continues to condition the movement through time, and where the polity comes together around the necessary things in life. The transmission, and transformation, over time of this historio-

41 Viroli 2010a: 154.

42 Machiavelli, *The Prince* 14.50.

43 See the analysis in Lev 2020: 32–41.

44 Marsilius, *The Defender of the Peace* I.3.2.14.

45 Marsilius, *The Defender of the Peace* I.4.3.19.

graphical template is a complex process. From our vantage point, Machiavelli's decisive contribution lies in the way he situates theory in relation to the polity. In Marsilius, the position of theory remains indeterminate. In the first discourse of *The Defender of the Peace*, Marsilius argues that the highest authority in a polity is constituted by its body politic (*universitas civium*), which comprises the body of the faithful (*universitas fidelium*), making its authority civil and religious. But in the second discourse he reverts to a much more traditional viewpoint, according to which ultimate authority lies with the universal church of the faithful. The inversion suspends authority between the city, seat of the body politic, and the empire, seat of the universal body of the faithful.⁴⁶ The indeterminacy is lifted in Machiavelli's work where counsel aims at the good of the polity it concerns, and so adopts its vantage point.

What this means is that theory is situated *within*. Not only that. The *positionality* of theory combines with the effective dependence of government on the art of war to direct attention outwards. A prince must first survey the external sphere, not because it concerns what is most important in *il vivere civile*, but because the threats that emerge within that sphere pose a more immediate and direct danger to government. This way of seeing the world informs Machiavelli's observation that "[internal] affairs will always be stable when external affairs are stable, provided that they are not already disturbed by a conspiracy".⁴⁷ In taking note of the curvature of political space Machiavelli gestures towards a time, in which violence is distributed along clear boundary lines that separate armed force from intrigue.⁴⁸ Here, he turns away from a Christian doctrine that saw war as inherently sinful, equally sinful for all participants, and therefore required of a belligerent that he show just cause.

46 Marsilius, *The Defender of the Peace* II.2.3.145. See the analysis in Lev 2020: 64–69.

47 Machiavelli, *The Prince* 19.63 (transl. from Bondanella 2005).

48 Machiavelli dedicates the longest chapter of the *Discourses* to conspiracies, telling us that many more princes have lost their lives and their states through conspiracy than through open warfare because it is only given to very few to wage open warfare, whereas the possibility of conspiring against a prince is open to everyone (Machiavelli, *Discourses* III.6.256). But to Machiavelli, a conspiracy is not something you fight with violence. It is something you prevent by magnifying the glory and the majesty of the prince, which convinces conspirators that others will rally around their cause, or which even holds back the hand that is about to strike (III.6.257, III.6.268–69).

He also bars the way back to the ancient world that Aristotle describes. In that world, war was an aspect of political life. Its oppositions were parallel to those found within the *polis*, with the effect of making the inner and the outer reversible, as we see in the *Politics* where local disturbances, often over trivial matters, spread across the greater world of Hellas through bonds of kinship that linked elites within city states, and where the outcome of conflicts like the Peloponnesian War would occasion constitutional changes in the defeated city states.⁴⁹

From the position that Machiavelli occupies, it is not possible to set limits to the means a prince can employ to secure his reign. The balancing of means presupposes the existence of a moral space. That space must first be secured. Morality comes after. We are used to explaining Machiavelli's willingness to postpone moral reasoning by reference to his psyche, or his personal ambition, but as already indicated, the causes may run deeper. In a study of Machiavelli's God Maurizio Viroli relates his theory of government to a current of thought that was pervasive in Florence till 1530, a *republican Christianity* that taught that the fatherland was the supreme good, to the point that it could do no wrong, even where it fought unjust wars.⁵⁰ The resonances between the Machiavelli's work and the city, of which he was a citizen, open a window onto his time. Beyond its inherent historiographical interest, such disclosure is valuable because it shows us how Machiavelli constructs a theory of government from an intuition of historical time. The thing that grabs his attention is the rise of professional armies, which he associates with the dominant power of the time, the French kingdom.⁵¹ The paradox is that he will attempt to recreate the ancient ways that were lost because of mercenary armies by working through what destroyed them. In line with the teachings of Savonarola, Machiavelli insists on the need to regenerate the body politic.⁵² But in indexing regeneration on the capacity of the citizen body to defend their city, he confirms, indeed radicalises, the process of concentrating political skill in a governing subject. The attempt

49 Arist. *Pol.* 1304a5-10; *Ath. Pol.* 34.3. On the proximity between war and civil war in Greek culture, and the evacuation of same, see Loraux 2005: 84-87.

50 Viroli 2010b: 59-60.

51 Machiavelli, *The Art of War* I.78-79.16, I.104.19.

52 Jones 2022: 82-85.

to recreate the ancient ways closes off the present to what those ways were about. We see how this plays out in passage from the *Discourses* where Machiavelli considers how to reform the Christianity of his age, which had made the world an easy prey for evil men:

This way of living seems, therefore, to have made the world weak and to have given it over to be plundered by wicked men, who are easily able to dominate it, since in order to go to paradise, most men think more about enduring their pains than about avenging them. Although it appears that the world has become soft and heaven has been disarmed, without a doubt this arises more from the cowardice of men who have interpreted our religion according to an ideal of freedom from earthly toil and not according to one of exceptional ability (*virtù*). For if they would consider how our religion permits us to exalt and defend our native land, they would see that it also wants us to love and honour it, and to prepare ourselves in such a way that we can defend it.⁵³

Machiavelli proposes to turn Christianity into a fighting faith. When reading the passage, our first thoughts are likely to concern the sincerity of his commitment to “our religion,” given that devotion and political expediency cannot be separated. It might be heaven that Machiavelli wants to arm, but the benefits of armament are to be reaped here and now. If Christian princes knew how to use religion for civic ends, the republics of Italy would be “more united and happier” than they are.⁵⁴ However, in focusing on the sincerity of Machiavelli’s belief, we run the risk of overlooking another crucial development, which concerns the use he makes of history. The question is not whether the all too obvious expediency of marrying religion to statecraft should make us rule out that Machiavelli is guided by an experience of transcendence; the question is

53 Machiavelli, *Discourses* II.2.159 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

54 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.12.54 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

whether the considerations that he proposes to join together can be contained in the same history.⁵⁵

Isiah Berlin alluded to the question in arguing that we should think of Machiavelli as a pagan thinker, as someone who sought to recover earlier, more virile ways of life.⁵⁶ And the considerations that motivate Machiavelli's project of invigorating "our religion" do indeed have a distinctly non-Christian feel. But Machiavelli's belief that Christianity could serve the same function as pagan religion (which Berlin notes) tells us that what he is looking for is not, in his mind, something other than Christianity properly understood. We might say that Machiavelli's juxtaposition of meek Christianity and virile Antiquity, around which Berlin constructs his reading, is thought from within the moment of writing, and has no diagnostic validity outside it. Machiavelli is not giving us an analysis of the political morality associated with two kinds of religion (Christian/pagan) but an appraisal of the political morality that is needed here and now for the good of the fatherland. If we insist on the difference, it is because it opens our eyes to the fact that Machiavelli does not think in terms of causation that could propel a historical narrative; he thinks in terms of situational efficacy, in relation to which all epochs of history are available as points of reference, and where the truth of what they have to teach us is found in a specific way of life that is itself impervious to change.

We see how this approach structures his work in the preface to the second book of the *Discourses* where Machiavelli considers how men assess history. If they live in a well organised body politic, they may well be deceiving themselves in praising ancient times more than their own time, not so where they are born after the decline of the polity set in. These commonsensical considerations are followed by a somewhat abrupt conclusion: "As I reflect upon how these affairs proceed, I conclude that the world has always been in the same state, and that although there has always been as much good as evil in it, this evil and this good vary

55 We leave aside the question, raised by Gennaro Sasso (1980: 510-12), whether we can distinguish between faith as an experience of transcendence and as belief in the efficacy of a system of tenets that happen to be religious in nature.

56 Berlin 2013: 56-57.

from province to province; this can be seen from what we know of ancient kingdoms that differed from one another according to the variation in their customs, while the world remained as it had always been”.

The passage surprises by its willingness to dispense with, indeed foreclose on, historical enquiry. The thesis of the constancy of good and evil makes *virtù* a matter of differing social customs, of differences in space rather than time. If history teaches us something, it is as an archive, not as a narrative that inserts us in a continuous historical trajectory. Machiavelli goes on to enumerate a list of ancient empires, in which *virtù* was lodged (*allogata*). In this world that remained as it had always been, the shifting assignation of *virtù* was, he tells us, the only difference. The point is clearly not to indicate the stages in what would be a history of *virtù*; it is to indicate sites of a domination, which gives political space its curvature, and from which political reasoning must depart. This domination is the basic fact of history, no matter when, and from which vantage point, we engage with it. As we read on, we find that the basic fact, which frames Machiavelli's engagement with history, is a specific way of life. He continues the list of sites of domination past antiquity. While none of the modern sites of *virtù* equals Rome, we are told that *virtù* was still to be found among nations. In this context, Germany occupies a special place. It alone escapes the general corruption of the world that eats away at the strength of kingdoms such as France and Spain, which have lost the goodness and religion, on which the strength of a polity rests:

It is quite evident that in the province of Germany this goodness and religion are still strong among the people; that causes many republics there to flourish in liberty and to obey their laws in such a fashion that no one outside or within these republics dares to occupy them. [...] Such goodness is all the more to be admired in these times since it is so rare; indeed, it is clear that this practice has survived only in that province. This arises from two causes: the first is that they have no extensive contacts with their neighbours, for their neighbours have not gone to visit them, nor have they themselves visited anyone else, because they are content with these goods – to live on the foods, and to dress themselves with the wools the country produces; in this way,

the reason for any contact and the beginnings of any kind of corruption have been eliminated, since they have not been able to take up the habits of either the French, the Spanish, or the Italians, nations which taken together constitute the corruption of the world. The other reason is that these republics, where an uncorrupted body politic has been maintained, do not tolerate any of their citizens acting or living like noblemen: on the contrary, they maintain among themselves a clear equality; they are the mortal enemies of those lords and noblemen who live in that province, and if by chance some of them fall into their hands, they are killed as the source of corruption and the cause of every conflict.⁵⁷

The exceptional ability that enabled a small city on the Italian peninsula to rise to become the greatest empire in history survives in Germany, and no place else. Strangely, given the expansionism and inclusivity of Rome, what keeps *virtù* alive in Germany is the isolation of its people, which has only limited contact with the outside world. Their neighbours do not seek them out, presumably because they have little to offer. For their part, the German people do not seek out their neighbours because they are content with their rustic life, content “to live on the foods, and to dress themselves with the wools the country produces”. Their isolation keeps them pure, unsullied by the refined habits of the southern nations that constitute the corruption of the world. The reference to the rustic introduces a *primitivism* that stands against refinement and social distinction, granting immediate access to what is most fundamental in life. The hatred of nobility that Machiavelli attributes to the peoples of Germany implies a commitment to the common people, but it is not clear that the commitment is political in nature. What concerns him about nobility is not that its introduction would entail a violation of the people’s rights, but that difference would be introduced into an otherwise indistinct body politic, with the effect of splintering it.

In this passage which connects Machiavelli’s enquiry into the Roman Republic to his own time, he posits a dimension of human life so basic as to be unchanging. It is from this vantage point that he can assure us that

57 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.55.135-36 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

men “are always born, live, and die in the same way”.⁵⁸ It is an open question whether this assurance is compatible with other key intuitions that inform his theory of government. What matters for our purposes is that the in-distinction of the body politic is tied to his decision to invest that body with the very same force that made antiquity great. As our analysis shows, the desire to make the past come alive again is what prevents its recovery. In a time that is concerned with making past empires great again, it is perhaps worth remembering that primitivism does not open a road back to what once was. It only makes us lose sight of where we came from, and where we need to go.

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58 Machiavelli, *Discourses* I.11.53 (transl. from Bondanella & Bondanella 1997).

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