Machiavelli reloaded: Perceptions and misperceptions of the 'Prince of realism'

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Abstract This article analyses the impact and legacy of Niccolò Machiavelli's thought in International Relations. It explores the various and contrasting interpretations that have characterized the 'Machiavellian Moment' in political theory and international studies, revisiting some of its fundamental concepts – such as *fortuna*, *virtù*, *cose di stato* – and highlighting their strong heuristic and analytical potential for International Relations. The article also serves as an Introduction to the various sections and contributions of the Special Issue.

> I compare fortune to one of those dangerous rivers that, when they become enraged, flood the plains, destroy trees and buildings, move earth from one place and deposit it in another. Everyone flees before it, everyone gives way to its thrust, without being able to halt it in any way. But this does not mean that, when the river is not in flood, men are unable to take precautions, by means of dykes and dams, so that when it rises next time, it will either not overflow its banks or, if it does, its force will not be so uncontrollable or damaging.
>
> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter XXV

Assessing the importance of Niccolò Machiavelli's work in the history of Western political thought, Isaiah Berlin (1980, p. 74) noted: 'Machiavelli's cardinal achievement is […] his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma, the planting of a permanent question mark in the path of posterity'. Berlin's analysis proved to be revelatory. Indeed, for scholars of politics and international relations alike, the

thought of the Florentine has become a sort of 'unsolved riddle'. In fact, Machiavelli has often been interpreted in a number of different and contrasting ways: sometimes referred to as the ultimate interpreter of *Staatsräson* [*raison d'État*] (Meinecke, 1924) or as a true 'master of evil' (Strauss, 1978), as a neo-pagan and demonic thinker (Ritter, 1947; Voegelin, 1998) or as a humanist imbued with religious republicanism (Viroli, 2010), as an anti-modern thinker of 'aleatory politics' (Althusser, 1999) or as among the founders of modern politics (Skinner, 1978).

This 'ambiguity of Machiavelli' has long puzzled International Relations (IR) scholars. In Martin Wight's view (1994, p. 16, emphasis added), for example, Machiavelli would be 'the first man (since the Greeks) to look at politics without ethical presuppositions. *He was in a real sense the inventor of Realism*' (see also Wight, 2004, pp. 3–28). According to this reading, Machiavelli would be the one who opened the Pandora's box of modern politics, showing its demonic face: the inability to reconcile and harmonize ethics and politics, two worlds *toto caelo* different, which it is necessary to keep distinct and distant. As Berlin (1980, pp. 74–75) has aptly put it, 'the scandal of Machiavelli' would stem from

> his *de facto* recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality or accident or error – the clash of Antigone and Creon or in the story of Tristan – but (this was surely new) as part of the normal human situation.

In this sense, then, the 'Machiavellian moment' would represent the 'zero point' of the realist tradition, the dawn of a new thought on politics finally freed from religion and moral values. As a matter of fact, the divide between ethics and politics runs throughout the realist corpus and constantly re-emerges in various guises within this school of thought. Suffice to think of Thomas Hobbes's famous dictum 'Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words',[1] or to the sharp separation between private and public morality established by G.W.F. Hegel (2003),[2] passing through Max Weber (1949, p. 20) and his doctrine of *Wertfreiheit* and of the 'absolute heterogeneity' of fact and 'value-judgments', up to Carl Schmitt's analysis (2007) on the 'autonomy of the political', to mention only some of the best-known names. Kenneth Waltz too (2001, pp. 215–216) – before the 'neo-realist turn' – describes, in a *locus classicus*, the thought of the Florentine in terms of *Realpolitik*:

> To Machiavelli … internal order and external security are necessary before there is even the possibility of men living lives of some freedom and decency … If by cruelty the dykes and banks are built and kept in good repair, then cruelty is the greatest mercy. If by practicing virtue they are torn down again, then virtue is the greatest vice.

In short, "*salus publica suprema lex*" would be the assumption behind the whole of Machiavelli's political theory, which would make him the precursor of modern *raison d'État*. Indeed, when politics and the safety of the state are at stake, 'no considerations of justice or injustice, humanity or cruelty, nor of glory or of shame, should be allowed to prevail' (Machiavelli, 1882, p. 421).

This reading has been challenged, as is well known, by R.B.J. Walker. Although granting great standing to Machiavelli's work, Walker (1993, p. 31) is skeptical about the inscription of the Florentine secretary's ideas into a particular 'tradition'. For he maintains that '[c]ontrary to both the so-called realists who treat Machiavelli as one of their own and the so-called idealists who castigate him for his supposed realism, Machiavelli poses questions about political community and practice that may still be pursued even though his answers expose his own limited historical and conceptual horizons'. In other words, more than being a mere doctrine or set of principles, the 'Machiavellian moment' in IR would reveal the concealed and 'constituted nature of both the theory and practice of international politics', and hence represent a fruitful site of investigation for contemporary IR (ibid., p. 29).

Walker's point is an important one. In effect, the various readings and 'images' of Machiavelli that have taken place throughout history tell us much more of the time from which they emerged than on the essence of the Florentine Secretary's thought. Machiavelli, in this sense, can also serve as a 'theoretical and conceptual mirror' through which to decipher the various 'political ontologies' that were reflected in his thought, thus giving life to the 'Machiavelli enigma' mentioned by Benedetto Croce (1949). For example, the characterization of Machiavelli as 'anti-moral' and enemy of religion, listed in the *Index librorum prohibitorum* in 1559 and the subject of fierce criticism of Innocent Gentillet in his *Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner (Anti-Machiavel*, 1576),[3] reflects much more the crisis of legitimacy of the Church produced by the civil wars of religion in France than the Florentine's political thought; just as the "new prince" coveted by Antonio Gramsci (1992, pp. 125–133), in some well-known pages of his *Prison Notebooks*, tells us much more of his desire

to reread Machiavelli in order to give a solid 'foundation to the national State' and energize the Italian Communist party.

We are presented with projections and counter-projections, therefore: with smoke and mirrors that have served to legitimize – from time to time – different (even opposing) political doctrines. Even the shared – and seemingly non-problematic – assumption according to which Machiavelli would be the precursor of *Realpolitik* needs to be at least clarified. Max Scheler (1990, pp. 7–74), for instance, by analysing the relationship between politics and morality, has identified four conceptions or 'solutions' for what he called the 'squaring of the circle' of practical philosophy. According to the first conception, in which Scheler (ibid., p. 16) includes the work of Hobbes and Marx, ethics would be subject to politics because moral values would be nothing more than the product of power struggles (in this sense, politics>ethics). For the second type, to which Kant and Bentham belong, it would be for politics to be subordinated to ethics because the latter would limit the space for righteous political action (ethics>politics). There would then be a third conception, one that we have already encountered and can be traced back to Hegel, according to which there are two kinds of ethics, a private one and a state or public morality that, due to its relevance and importance, must incorporate the former. Finally, there would be the Machiavellian conception, according to which between politics and morality there is neither *unity* nor *subordination*; these two domains are mutually *incommensurable* (politics>|<ethics).

If, therefore, the 'realism of Machiavelli' can be considered a *unicum* within the tradition which he himself had originated, how can we explain this originality? What lies behind the incommensurability and incommunicability between politics and morality? What conception of history is the background for this 'autonomy of the political'? In Book I of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli (1888, p. 180, emphasis added) addresses precisely this *problématique*:

> Whoever considers the past and the present will readily observe that all cities and all peoples are and ever have been animated by *the same desires and the same passions*; so that it is easy, by diligent study of the past, *to foresee what is likely to happen in the future in any republic*, and to apply those remedies that were used by the ancients, or, not finding any that were employed by them, to devise new ones from the similarity of the events. But as such considerations are neglected or not understood by most of those

who read, or, if understood by these, *are unknown by those who govern*, it follows that
the same troubles generally recur in all republics.

Because of 'the prodigies of virtue and of wisdom displayed by the kings, captains,
citizens, and legislators' of the past, it seems obvious to Machiavelli that history
should be considered *magistra vitae et nuntia vetustatis* [directress of life and herald
of antiquity]. Yet these 'wonderful examples' are 'more admired than imitated',
especially in the realm of politics where 'you will find neither prince, nor republic,
nor captain, nor citizen, who has recourse to the examples of antiquity' (ibid., p. 93).
On the one hand, therefore, Machiavelli embraces a cyclical view of history,
according to which human affairs are 'in a state of perpetual movement, always either
ascending or declining'; on the other hand, this apparent 'eternal return of the same',
which makes the historical course of events readable, finds 'fault in the present'
because 'we never know the whole truth about the past' (ibid., pp. 223–224). There is
therefore an important paradox in the core of Machiavelli's political theory: the past,
repeating itself, is like a mine of 'glorious examples' that can teach us the correct
political action, yet, just because we are unable to internalize its lessons, history can
repeat itself cyclically and slide into future.

But why then – one might wonder at this point – is historical experience not reflected
in our political present? How come that the past is a teacher but men are not capable
of learning? Machiavelli gives two reasons. Firstly, the writing of history always
misrepresents 'facts' because 'the majority of authors obey the fortune of conquerors'
(ibid., p. 223). History is written by the victors who tend – through their perspective
and writing – to distort it. The second and more important reason lies in human
nature, and more precisely in the fact that men, in the present, are driven by passions
and desires, and their 'hatreds generally spring from fear or envy' (ibid., p. 223). This
means that the past is open to *logos* (writing and discussion) because it is emotionally
distant, because we do not experience it directly; yet its lesson is soon forgotten
because in the *immediacy of the present* men fall prey to their passions. As he put it:
'these two powerful reasons of hatred do not exist for us with regard to the past,
which can no longer inspire either apprehension or envy. But it is very different with
the affairs of the present, in which we ourselves are either actors or spectators' (ibid.,
p. 223). Politics is the realm of action and actuality upon which the glory of the past
shines blinding us, as it were, without lightening our possibilities. In other words,

from *within* the 'historical cycle', at its apex as well as at its base, one cannot be aware of the momentum and cyclical direction of the constant recurrence. History is *lux veritatis* [light of truth] that cannot be transformed into *vita memoriae* [life of memory].

Machiavelli's world is therefore imbued with a tragic vision of history and politics. For the Florentine human passions are immutable as they constantly clash against the invisible and fickle walls of Fortune '(because their nature is to have all and to do everything whilst fortune limits their possessions and capacity of enjoyment)' (ibid., p. 225). And yet, and in this too the 'realism of Machiavelli' differs from that of Hobbes, the relationship between freedom and destiny, chance and necessity, fortune and virtue is not simply based on a negative anthropology (man's natural propensity to evil) which becomes the fulcrum upon which the security problem (survival) rests and that, in turn, politics must address by closing itself and creating geometric (inside/outside) and well-defined political forms (the Leviathan-state). For Machiavelli, political action cannot be caged in a structure because it depends on the constantly changing relationship between fortune and virtue. Fortune, as Machiavelli explains in a famous passage of *The Prince*, is a 'dangerous river' that can neither be stemmed nor sealed in a form or in a space. In fact, 'the prince who relies completely upon Fortune will come to ruin as soon as she changes' (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 85). But human nature is varied too – although *immutable* in its plurality of 'faces, temperaments and imaginations'[4] – and for this reason one must find the right balance between circumstances and charisma, turning the chance into necessity, and fortune into virtue:

> […] the man who adapts his method of procedure to the nature of the times will prosper, and likewise, … the man who establishes his procedures out of tune with the times will come to grief. We can observe in the affairs that lead them to the end they seek – that is, towards glory and wealth – that men proceed in different ways: one man with caution, another with impetuousness; one with violence, another with astuteness; one with patience, another with its opposite. Each may achieve his goals with these different means. In the case of two cautious men, we also see that one reaches his goal while the other does not. And likewise, two men prosper equally employing two different means, one being cautious and the other impetuous. This occurs from nothing other than from the quality of the times, that either match or do not match their

procedures. (Machiavelli, 2005, p. 85)

The problem of the incommensurability between politics and ethics is not therefore a (merely) political matter but rests on a particular philosophy of history. On closer consideration, the 'realism of Machiavelli' is an immanentist historicism. Once you cut the ties with Providence and theology (and accordingly with *teleology*), history becomes precisely what Max Weber (1949, p. 81), from a perspective far removed temporally but theoretically very close to Machiavelli's, defined as 'the meaningless infinity of the world process…on which human beings confer meaning and significance'. The lack of intelligibility of the relationship between past, present and future thus becomes a problem for political action and its (often unexpected) consequences, a moment open to 'glorious decisions' (see Vatter, 2000). True, for Machiavelli (2005, p. 86) the nature of man is hardly malleable and very often poorly suited to the 'stern seriousness' of the times ('since Fortune varies and men remain obstinate in their ways, men prosper when the two are in harmony and fail to prosper when they are not in accord'). Yet the great politicians are capable of adapting to their time because *recognize within themselves*, as it were, the signs of destiny. They seize the opportunity and with their decisions are able, for a short period of time, to navigate the tempestuous seas agitated by contingency and *fortuna*. In other words, history for Machiavelli is configured as a gigantomachia around chance.

In this sense, then, there is at work in the thought of the Florentine something much more shocking than the mere autonomy of politics from ethics and morality: the momentous discovery that politics and history are not *completely* rationalizable, that values tend to fall prey to fate and passions, that human nature – unchanging yet plural – will always clash against what is constantly mutable; that Fortune, in short, is a woman without a face that cannot be fixed into a form to be contemplated. It is this complex vision of history and political action, passions and reasons, opportunities and decisions that makes Machiavelli a fundamental thinker of (post)modernity. He is the founder of a political realism and a theory of modernity alternative to those of Hobbes and Rousseau, which are entirely based on social control and social contract (see Galli, 2009; Del Lucchese, 2011). Therein lies, in our opinion, the reasons to reread Machiavelli in the age of the crisis of the state, of compressed temporality, and of unstructured immanence.

However, apart for 'a few, well-known maxims', and some notable exceptions, the 'Machiavellian moment' in IR has not generated a number of studies truly commensurate to the standing of this important thinker. Indeed, while other 'classics' of international theory – such as Thucydides, Grotius, Hobbes and Kant, to name just a few – have been subject of numerous studies, 'Machiavelli has, by and large, been neglected by contemporary students of international relations' (Cesa, 2014, p. 1). Even the engagement by post-positivist scholars after the 'critical turn' in IR Theory of the early 1990s did not prove long-lasting and ran out of steam soon after it was initiated (Walker, 1991, 1993; Gill, 2000; Hoadley, 2001). The literature and research networks more recently devoted to reassess the legacy of classical realism from a critical theory perspective have furthermore focused on thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau (Levine, 2013) and E.H. Carr (Molloy, 2013), curiously marginalising Machiavelli so far. No wonder, then, that in a recent important book on the *Foundations of Modern International Thought*, David Armitage (2013, p. 155, fn. 9) does not devote a single paragraph to the analysis of Machiavelli's work and actually relegates it to a footnote.

The aim of this Special Issue is to provide a full exploration of Machiavelli's complex and multifaceted international political theory, resuming an interrupted conversation and filling the gap on such a topical thinker. From *The Prince* to *The Discourses*, from *The Art of War* to *The Histories*, the Special Issue aims to re-explore the key issues in Machiavelli's international thought, and dig in depth into some of its most fundamental aspects: the relevance of human nature in determining political conflict; the influence of his ideas on the Realist tradition; the use of force and the morality dilemma; the importance of laws in the foundation of states and their limitations; the central role played by charisma and chance in influencing foreign policy; the impact of domestic political structures on international politics. As demonstrated by the contributors, interrogating Machiavelli's thought has a significant potential for both IR theory and the analysis of specific issues in contemporary international relations. Faithful to Machiavelli's lesson, and to its principle of 'determinable indeterminacy' of politics, the contributors have tried to re-assess his legacy and ideas aware that – as Kenneth Waltz (2001, p. 212) put it – 'the great political philosophers demand being read and read again, and one finds that each rereading brings an enlarged and deepened understanding'.

Plan of the issue

The special issue consists of two thematically organised sections. In the first section, Machiavelli's work is presented and assessed in the context of the classical theoretical trajectories within IR and compared to the arguably still central theoretical approach of political Realism. The first paper of the section by **Michael Jackson** and **Thomas Moore** evaluates Machiavelli's ethos of statecraft against the backdrop of Realism in International Relations theory. By concentrating, as Machiavelli did, on the walls that define political relations, the authors find his insights deeply rooted in the specific political contexts of Sixteenth century Italy. In fact, as Jackson and Moore show, Machiavelli was mindful of the difficulties of generalizing about walls and acknowledged the dangers political actors faced in navigating between the internal and external walls of the polity. By examining the geopolitical contours of Machiavelli's walls, Jackson and Moore seek to demonstrate how morality is present in these historical spaces. In contrast to Realists, they argue, Machiavelli was ready and willing to make ethical judgments. In this sense, they conclude, theorists of international politics should exercise care in reaching for Machiavelli as the iconic thinker of *Realpolitik* and for making sense of anarchy in world politics.

In the second paper, **Michele Chiaruzzi** follows a different yet convergent theoretical trajectory. Analysing a hitherto unpublished manuscript of Martin Wight (for the first time edited and published in Italian by Chiaruzzi in 2014), he examines Machiavelli's influence on Wight's reflection on causal and moral complexity in international politics and its relationship with the study and practice of politics. According to Chiaruzzi, Machiavelli's attempt to describe the limits of freedom in political experience, and the dilemmas imposed by these limits, has been closely echoed in the work of the English School thinker. More specifically, Wight was convinced that Machiavelli's concept of 'fortune' describes the most ancient and fundamental experience of politics – the politician's consciousness that men and events are recalcitrant to purposeful guidance, that the results of political action never square with intention, that he never can have command of all the relevant material. By explaining the relevance of these notions to international politics, Chiaruzzi's paper aims at assessing Machiavelli's legacy in Wight's thought, presenting a critical appraisal of political realism and a rejection of political determinism. In the final

paper of this section, **Simon Labrecque** argues that a productive way of studying Machiavelli's legacy for International Relations is to examine the contemporary scholarly works that have sought to assess this legacy. More precisely, he sets out to engage the 'Machiavellian moment' as a problem that concerns IR through the claims made on this issue by R.B.J. Walker. As well known, Machiavelli is given a prominent role in Walker's most famous book, *Inside/Outside* (1993), as a privileged figure through whom the question of a tradition of IR can be re-addressed. In this regard, then, reading Walker's critical examination of the epochal roles attributed to Machiavelli in theories of the modern 'international' reveals that he repeatedly refers to the "overriding importance" of Leo Strauss's reading of Machiavelli "as the point of collapse in the 'great tradition' that Strauss counter-poses to modernity". In documenting Walker's reading of Strauss's Machiavelli as a political matter of concern, and in discussing Strauss's own account of modernity, Labrecque aims at revealing how these two hermeneutical exercises represent an attempt to deconstruct a particular ontology of IR.

But what is Machiavelli's legacy in our time? Can his work still be used as a map in order to frame the 'liquidity' that characterizes the so-called global age? In the second section of the issue, Machiavelli's political theory will be used to rethink some of the crucial theoretical and political challenges raised by the dynamics of globalization: from the fragmentation of the state to the emergence of asymmetric violence, from the intensification and transformation of security challenges to the random chaoticity that characterizes historical processes in the new global network. Using Machiavelli's conceptualization of power, violence, *fortuna* and *virtù*, the contributors will try to assess its relevance for contemporary international relations. In this regard, **Aslı Çalkıvik's** contribution focuses on the conceptualization of political violence in Machiavelli's writings. She explores the extent to which disciplinary appropriation of his views on the role of violence in international politics does justice to the complexities of Machiavelli's thought. Despite deep ontological, epistemological schisms among various approaches in IR, she suggests, one can discern an implicit consensus among scholars concerning Machiavelli's political language on violence, so that they remain wedded to "an instrumental ontology of violence." Taking as starting point this implicit consensus and probing its limits, Çalkıvik contends that Machiavelli's theorization of political violence both complicates and remains in

excess of such an ontology: a surplus constituted by the symbolic, affective dimension of political violence present in his writings. Through such a reading, Machiavelli emerges not only as a political theorist who grasps the violent foundations of modern political authority, but also as a thinker, whose perceptive account figures political violence as a discursive medium. Following similar lines, **Kimberly Hutchings** investigates the ways in which Machiavelli relates and distinguishes the conditions and virtues of war and peace. She argues that the ambivalences, even contradictions, within Machiavelli's writings on the relationship between politics and war speak to ongoing concerns about the relation between the state and war. In common with many other thinkers at different times and places, gendered language provides one of the tools Machiavelli uses to make sense of his ambivalence in the relation he prescribes between the republic and the military camp. For Hutchings, analysing Machiavelli's gendering allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relation between the state and war, and more broadly, between politics and violence, than is available within the gendered terms of contemporary debate.

Finally, **Simon Glezos** uses Machiavelli's radical, a-teleological vision of temporality expressed through his discussion of *Fortuna* to investigate the interrelation between XXI century activist movements and the technological revolution. Examining the narrative of different 'Internet Revolutions' (the Arab Spring, the European Anti-Austerity/Anti-Neoliberalism protests, the Occupy Movement), Glezos speaks to a broader trope in contemporary culture: the cyber-utopian belief in social media as a fast track to political change. Machiavelli's complex and nuanced theory of political action – with its attentiveness both to slow-moving community building, and to bold, fast-moving action – is ideal for thinking through transnational activism in a globalized and accelerating world. Such a framework, according to Glezos, can help us think critically about the nature of social media, avoiding the pitfalls of cyber-utopianism, while embracing the opportunities that information technologies might provide us with. Rescuing Machiavelli from his caricature as a 'thinker of speed', and a defender of statist hierarchies, Glezos reorients our thinking about the Florentine by highlighting not just his republicanism, but his attentiveness to the multiple temporalities of political life, and the arduous – but crucial – work of community building.

Acknowledgements

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[1]The full passage goes as follows: 'For the Lawes of Nature
(as *Justice*, *Equity*, *Modesty*, *Mercy*, and (in summe) *doing to others*, *as wee would be done to*,) of themselves, without the terrour of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our naturall Passions, that carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like. And Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all'. Cf. Hobbes (1651, p. 85).

[2] According to Hegel (2003, p. 275), the state 'possesses the highest right in relation to individuals [*die Einzelnen*], whose *highest duty* is to be members of the state'.

[3] 'Vous pourrez aussi voir icy, Monseigneur, comme le devoir d'un bon Prince est d'embrasser est soustenir la Religion Chrestienne, et de cercher et s'enquerir de la pure verité d'icelle, et non pas approuver ni maintenir la fausseté en la Religion comme Machiavel enseigne' [As you can see, your Excellency, the duty of a good Prince is to support the Christian religion, and to search for and enquire into its pure truth, and not to approve or condone the falsehood in religion as Machiavelli teaches]. Cf. Gentillet (1576, pp. 2–3).

[4] Cf. Machiavelli's (1979, p. 63) letter to Giovan Battista Soderini: 'I believe that as Nature has given every man a different face, so she also has given each a different character and imagination. From this it follows that each man governs himself according to his particular character and imagination. And because, on the other hand, times change and the order of things always shifts, the fortunate man, the one whose wishes are completely fulfilled, is he who fits his plan of action to the times; to the contrary, the unhappy man is he who fails to match his actions to the times and to the order of things'.