

**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE**  
**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

EUI Working Paper **SPS** No. 2001/3

**Macchiavelli's Theory of Political Action:  
Tragedy, Irony and Choice**

RAFAEL DEL ÁGUILA

**BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO (FI)**

All rights reserved.  
No part of this paper may be reproduced in any form  
without permission of the author.

© 2001 Rafael del Águila  
Printed in Italy in February 2001  
European University Institute  
Badia Fiesolana  
I - 50016 San Domenico (FI)  
Italy

**MACHIAVELLI'S THEORY OF POLITICAL ACTION: TRAGEDY,  
IRONY AND CHOICE.<sup>1</sup>**

**Rafael del Águila, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.  
Visiting Professor IUE**

.....

***Summary:***

**1. The Plurality of Machiavellis.**

- 1.1 Strategy: the Isolated Subject;
- 1.2 Republic: Means and Ends;
- 1.3 Tragedy: the Internal Tension of Action.

**2. Tragedy, Justice, and the Role of Compassion.**

- 2.1 Action and Uncertainty;
- 2.2 Compassion, Tragedy and Machiavelli.

**3. Tragedy and the Risks of Irony.**

- 3.1 Irony and Cruelty: the case of Machiavelli;
- 3.2 Domesticated Irony?.

**4. Final Remarks: Was Machiavelli a Tragic Thinker?**

.....

---

<sup>1</sup> A first version of this paper was delivered at the Political and Social Sciences Departmental Seminar, November 29<sup>th</sup> 2000, Istituto Universitario Europeo. I would like to thank all those who attend the session for their comments, and criticisms.

***"...che gli stati non si tenevanno co' paternostri in mano"***

***(Cosimo il Vecchio)***

***N. Machiavelli: Istorie Fiorentine, VII, 6***

***"Heaven for the climate, hell for the company"***

***S. de Grazia: Machiavelli in Hell, p. 318***

This paper deals with some elements of Machiavelli's theory of political action and its relation with tragedy and choice. In order to clarify my argument I will proceed as follows. 1. I will sketch three different interpretations of his work: the strategic, the republican, and the tragic readings of Machiavelli. 2. In second place, I will analyze how political action often involves tragic choices between common good and justice, and how this fact might develop (or not) political judgement and the virtue of compassion among citizens. 3. Afterwards, I will consider the relationship between tragedy and irony, and their dangerous connections with cruelty, with particular attention to the work of Machiavelli. 4. Finally, I will try to summarize the argument and to answer (tentatively) the question: Was Machiavelli a tragic thinker?.

## **1. The Plurality of Machiavellis.**

### **1.1 Strategy: the Isolated Subject.**

There was a time in which Machiavelli was considered the main antecedent of the strategic model of political action and one of the first theorists of the current model of political choice. A model which is dominated by purposive rationality, calculation, strategy, utility and rational choice.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there are reasons for considering Machiavelli an antecedent of this tradition. Specially if we follow the so called "realistic interpretations". According to them, Machiavelli would be a theorist essentially concerned with the technical-political problems of action and choice.

Schopenhauer employed a brilliant metaphor in regard to the Machiavellian teachings which underlined this technical character. The Florentine would teach politics in the same way that a **teacher of fencing** might impart his art: without prejudging who is the fencer (an honest man or a scoundrel) or to what ends he will dedicate the teachings (to free a princess or to murder venerable elders). Carl Schmitt preferred to refer to an **engineer** in order to personify the type of political action recommended by Machiavelli. Leonardo Olschki compared him to the

---

<sup>2</sup> For strategic action see J. Habermas: **The Theory of Communicative Action I. Reason and the Rationalization of Society**, Beacon Press, Boston, 1984. On the other hand, the current model of political choice might be understood as defined by four elements: 1. Commensurability (everything is measurable in a single scale); 2. Aggregation (a social result is obtained by aggregating individual outcomes); 3. Maximizing (individual and social rationality are aimed at getting as much as possible of 'utility'); 4. Exogenous preferences (preferences are considered to be given). See an acute criticism in M. Nussbaum: **Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and the Public Life**, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995, pp. 14 ff. May be I should mention too the strategic readings of Machiavelli in the growing bibliography that connect his theory with management, marketing, etc.

**architects** of the Renaissance, concerned above all with the resolution of technical problems. Ernst Cassirer employs the image of the **chess player**, who is passionately interested in the game itself, but who does not pay any attention to the potential cruelty of the rules of the game (why do so many pawns have to die?) or to the meaning of its goal (to checkmate).<sup>3</sup>

In all these examples, it is supposed that neither the fencer, nor the engineer, nor the architect, nor the chess player receive any formative impact on their character through action and choice. When action and choice are considered merely as technical devices (means to achieve ends), then the theory of political action focuses exclusively on the skill with which the ends are pursued: a good stab, a strong bridge, a functional building, a smart move. The subject of the action is either skillful or not: this is all that can be said about it. According to this, the subject maintain a merely technical relationship with means (which are of use or not to achieve ends, but should not to be judged immanently) and is completely isolated from ends (which are supposed to be self-evident or given)<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the subject has no other link with the world but "technical reason".

Normally these readings tend to be related to the separation between ethics and politics that Benedetto Croce pointed out.<sup>5</sup> Ethics would be the refuge of self-identity, of values, of the character of the subject, and, essentially, it would belong to the private sphere. Politics, which one would reach through the "path of wrong doing"<sup>6</sup>, would be an essentially technical activity based on calculation, strategy, and instrumental rationality. Nothing, or practically nothing, would connect both

---

<sup>3</sup> See E. Cassirer: *The Myth of the State*, Doubleday, Garden City- New York, 1953; L. Olschki: *Machiavelli the Scientist*, The Gillick Press, Berkeley, 1945; C. Schmitt: *Die Diktatur*, Duncker & Humboldt, Berlin, 1964; etc.

<sup>4</sup> Sebastian de Grazia (*Machiavelli in Hell*, Vintage Books, New York, 1994, p. 306.) comments that since in Machiavelli cruelty can be used (or not used) well or badly, cruelty became a tool, an instrument "detachable from the person using it".

<sup>5</sup> See B. Croce: *Etica e politica*, Laterza, Bari, 1981: "...il Machiavelli scopre la necessità e l'autonomia della politica, della politica che è di là, o piuttosto di qua, del bene e del male morale, che ha la sue leggi, a cui è vano ribellarsi, che non si può esorcizzare, e cacciare dal mondo con l'acqua benedetta" (p. 205).

<sup>6</sup> See N. Machiavelli: *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, in *Tutte le Opere*, a cura di Mario Martelli, Sansoni, Firenze, 1971, Book I, Chapter 9 (hereafter: *D, I, 9*). English version L.J. Walker, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1986.

spheres, since they are ruled by different *logoi*<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the specific *logos* of politics would be defined by a typical statement which is widely considered to be Machiavelian: the attainment of the (political) end justifies the use of (immoral) means.

Despite appearances, I think that these strategic interpretations are very similar indeed to those given by Leo Strauss and his school. As a matter of fact, when they refer to Machiavelli as a "teacher of evil", this is not due to any personal evil deed the Florentine had committed. Rather he is supposed to be "teacher of evil" because: 1. He thinks that man is "the lord of everything", i.e. should do as s/he pleases; 2. He considers that man should think and act strategically in order to attain his/her goals (whatever the means, whatever the goals); 3. He affirms that in this task man is isolated (from the community, from the tradition) and unbound (from morals, from ethics, from religion).<sup>8</sup>

So Machiavelli would be guilty of having introduced in our tradition an idea of "choice" completely free from any linkage (with tradition, with humanitarian concerns, with a set of fixed values, with morals, etc.). Furthermore, this "free choice" would be considered by Machiavelli as a proof of the deep relationship that exists between good and evil.<sup>9</sup> Even in republics, political virtue, and legitimate institutions might be supported through evil actions... and they often are...<sup>10</sup> So, according to Strauss, strategic action is the root of evil in Machiavelli's writings

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, M. García Pelayo: *Del mito y de la razón en la historia del pensamiento político*, Ed. Revista de Occidente, Madrid, 1968.

<sup>8</sup> See L. Strauss: *Political Philosophy*, Pegasus, New York, 1975, p. 85; also H.C.Mansfield Jr.: *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 1979, p. 441.

<sup>9</sup> "...evil is so closely associated with good, and so bound up are they one with the other, that it may easily happen that he who thinks he will get one, gets the other" (*Che sempre propinquo al bene sia qualche male, il quale con el bene si facilmente nasca che pare impossibile potere mancare del'uno volendo l'altro*", **D, III, 37**); also against Soderini: "What he failed to realize was that time waits for no man, that goodness alone does not suffice, that fortune is changeable and that malice is not to be placated by gifts" ("*... e non sapeva che il tempo non si può aspettare, la bontà non basta, la fortuna varia e la malignità non trova dono che la plachi*" -**D, III, 30**); see also: **D, I, 26**; **D, III, 3**; also *Il Principe* chapter 18 (en *Tutte le Opere*, M. Martelli ed., (Milan. Feltrinelli, 1971; English translation by G. Bull, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986; hereafter **P, 18**); etc. Also *Lettere* (en *ibidem*; hereafter **Let.**) "Niccolò Machiavelli a Francesco Guicciardini", 17 maggio 1521: "...il vero modo ad andare in Paradiso [sarebbe] imparare la via dello Inferno per fuggirla"

<sup>10</sup> See L. Strauss: *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 262; also H.C.Mansfield Jr: *Machiavelli's Virtue*, The university of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1998, p. 19.

because it "unbinds" the subject and make him/her aware of the close connection between politics and evil.

May be the best example of this type of action in Machiavelli is, I think, the new prince. Take, for instance, the case of Cesare Borgia. Being, as he is, without any traditional or transcendental legitimization for his rule, and facing all the risks of politics, he is forced (this is what Machiavelli want us to believe) to use violence, cruelty an fraud to survive and to success. In **P, 18**, Machiavelli says: "You must realize this: that a prince, specially a new prince, cannot observe all these things which give men reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion. And so he should have a flexible disposition, varying as fortune and circumstances dictate (...) he should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if necessary" (*"sapere entrare nel male, necessitato"*).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, even the new prince is a bad example of strategic action as such. In fact, for Machiavelli the new prince is bound to some sort of common good. Commenting on Cesare Borgia he affirms that he uses cruelty to reach union, peace and loyalty, and to give his subjects in Romagna "well being" and "good government" (**P, 7, 18**). So may be the strategic model of action applies mostly to Machiavelism rather than to Machiavelli. After all, perhaps only Machiavelism would meet the requirements of an isolated and unbound subject, purely technical means and the ends being "whatever" end the subject (whoever) considers appropriate.

---

<sup>11</sup> Also: **P, 7; P, 17; P, 19;** etc.

**TABLE 1: THE STRATEGIC MODEL OF POLITICAL ACTION.**

<b>1. Subject of political action (linked to the "world" through technical reason)</b>	<b>1.1. Isolated</b>	<b>1.1.1. From tradition 1.1.2. From community</b>
	<b>1.2. Unbound</b>	<b>1.2.1. From morality 1.2.2. From ethics 1.2.3. From religion</b>
<b>2. Means</b>	<b>2.1. In "technical" relation to subject.</b>	<b>2.1.1. No formative impact (except strategic impact).</b>
	<b>2.2. In "technical" relation to ends.</b>	<b>2.2.1. Efficacy (to reach the goal) 2.2.2. Efficiency (to reach the goal at lowest price)</b>
	<b>2.3. Transgression of morality: autonomy of politics. Ethics/politics different <i>Logoi</i>. Good and evil intertwined.</b>	<b>2.3.1. Means justified by ends (transgressions justified by political success)</b>
<b>3. Ends</b>	<b>3.1. Ends as given.</b>	<b>3.1.1. Whatever end (Machiavelism)</b>

According to this, we may define strategic action as follows:

1. The achievement of your ends (mostly to attain, to maintain, and to increase your power)
2. Justifies and legitimates the utilization of any technically adequate mean (regardless its morality)
3. Which permits you, the subject (new prince, tyrant, or literally "whoever"), to obtain your goals.

### **1.2. Republic: Means and Ends.**

Nonetheless, there are many Machiavellis in Machiavelli, and many of them do not fit the paradigm of strategic action and choice in the form suggested by these interpretations. The Machiavellian lesson goes further. It points out toward the problem of tragic choice and political action to be found at the heart of a republican community.

In order to understand the strategic model, one must relate it to a set of Machiavellian concepts in which that of corruption stands out. Corruption is identified by Machiavelli with a specific kind of political action that reflects the absence of *virtù* in citizens<sup>12</sup>, as well as the breakdown of the internal equilibrium in the community<sup>13</sup>. In this way, corruption is exemplified by a specific kind of action: particularistic actions intended to defend and further private interests<sup>14</sup>. That is, corruption is associated precisely with one kind of action and one kind of subject<sup>15</sup>: the isolated, privatized and egotistical individual. Thus, the corrupt subject would be one whose private world (the protection or furtherance thereof) turns out to be the point of reference for public action. That subject in whose private and egotistical calculations there is only room for strategic linkages justified from the perspective (absolute, undifferentiated, prior and

---

<sup>12</sup>. See N. Wood: "Machiavelli's Concept of Virtù Reconsidered", *Political Studies*, xv, 2, 1967.

<sup>13</sup>. See J.G.A. Pocock: *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975.

<sup>14</sup>. See Q. Skinner: "Machiavelli on the Maintenance of Liberty", *Politics*, 18, 2, December 1983.

<sup>15</sup>. For other meanings of corruption in the work of Machiavelli, see M. Viroli: *Machiavelli*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, pp. 131 ff.. Also A. Bonadeo: *Corruption, Conflict, and Power in the Works and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1973.

apolitical) of his gain. In other words, there is a sense in which the corrupt subject in Machiavelli, would be, precisely, that subject who thinks and acts through the model of strategic action.

According to the republican interpretation<sup>16</sup>, the goal of political action in the Machiavellian model consists in the protection and promotion of the virtuous community. Acting in plurality and competition, citizens try to excel, and to develop common good. Under these circumstances, the strategic model of action, in pursuit of a specific purpose (political liberty), is completely transformed. In the first place, now political action has undeniable effects on the character and identity of the citizens and on the republican political way of life. For the republican model, action is not only a logical craftiness, but a political act with immediate consequences for the citizens who engage in it and for the city in which they live. In fact, this is the way in which public education develops, because it is through participation in a *vivere civile* that the subject of political action learns (about politics, about him/herself, about public deliberation, about political tensions, etc.) So the subject is neither isolated from tradition and community, nor can be considered “unbound” of any political rules. Certainly, the republican citizen has to pursue common good and, at the same time, has to built that common good in terms of liberty, plurality and competition. So traditions of the political community constitute an integral part of his/her identity (though, the competent citizen should know what to use and what to discard in them).

Furthermore, because Machiavelli tries to recover (from certain republican traditions) a knowledge of political preservation, his intention, in this case, is to remember, selectively, those features of classical politics that could be useful to his political situation. According to some interpreters,<sup>17</sup> the knowledge of preservation implies maintaining and developing political memory, whilst the knowledge of political foundation of the new requires the art of forgetting. One must know what to remember and what to silence, from what to take an ironical distance and with whom to identify in a political way. As we will see, this requires a tragic choice to the extent that such a choice occurs within the realm of insecurity, of contingency and of the contradictory impulse of alternative courses of action. For the moment, it is important to underline that Machiavelli lets the burden of this choice to fall on the shoulders of the political

---

<sup>16</sup> On participation and self-control see *D, I, 40*; *D, I, 53*; on competition and conflict see *D, I, 2*; *Istorie Fiorentini*, in *Tute le Opere*, cit., *VII, 1*; hereafter *IF, VII, 1*; on laws and political rules *D, I, 7*; *D, I, 18*; *D, I, 42*; *IF, III, 2*; on memory and republican liberty *P, 5*; *D, II, 23*; etc.

<sup>17</sup> See B.J. Smith: *Politics & Remembrance. Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985, pp. 72-3.

*virtù* of the subject. Thus, *virtù* ought to be defined as “lucid intelligence, without self-indulgent dreams”, as Miguel Angel Granada puts it.<sup>18</sup> That is, *virtù* is not only technical ability to pursue ends, but also intelligence for developing the linkage between the means and ends in the action, courage for thinking against the current, and determination to maintain certain elements of the political community (those connected to liberty). In this sense, *virtù* adopts an intersubjective slant and centers itself in the creation and/or development of a free political order, a *vivere civile e libero*, in the midst of contingency and risk.

Concerning the “means” of political action, the republican model also transforms the strategic reading. In this case, means are not related to ends in an exclusively technical way. In fact, in the republican model of action means “mediate” ends. In this way, Machiavellian theory of political action would resemble strongly to Aristotelian teleological action<sup>19</sup>. That is: means are conducive to the end, but they are also an integral part of the end pursued. If this were the case, means cannot be of such a nature as to destroy the public sphere, or to eliminate the conditions of liberty, or to prevent future citizens to be free, etc. Certainly it is a very important part of Machiavelli’s teachings that sometimes you have “to break the rules” to reinforce the rules themselves. But what is important now is to be aware of the fact that the “breaking of rules” cannot destroy the basis of political action itself. So, means are important in themselves: they have immanent value, not only strategic value; they are to be judged by the consequences, but the consequences integrate certain principles (the defense and development of a *vivere civile e libero* under conditions of uncertainty and risk). In other words, they cannot eliminate the conditions for the flourishing of some values and institutions (in the end itself). That would be the reason why Machiavelli speaks about 1) actions in which the subject is “defeated”, but nevertheless he considered him/her virtuous and 2) actions in which the subject succeeds, but is clearly criticized by the Florentine. The first kind of actions can be exemplified by Machiavellian concept of “glory”, the second one by Machiavelli’s criticisms on tyrants.

Lets take some examples of the treatment of glory in Machiavelli’s writings: 1. You can die gloriously even if freedom of your city is lost in the battle (**D, III, 41**). 2. You can fail gloriously (**L’Asino, VII**). 3. It is more glorious to be defeated by force than by a

---

<sup>18</sup> See M.A. Granada: *El umbral de la modernidad*, Herder, Barcelona, 2000, p. 181.

<sup>19</sup> According to J.L. Ackrill (“Aristotle on Eudeimonia”, in A. Rorty ed.: *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980, pp 16 ff) the Greek statement that Aristotle use to describe his theory of action *ta pros to telos* would mean at the same time the instrumental means to reach an end and the fact that the means are also an integral part of the goal pursued.

failure of intelligence (**D, III, 10**). 4. Glory depends on difficulty and effort in the performed action –the more difficult to reach the end, the more glorious the enterprise– not on success (**P, 24; D, I, 10**).

In all these cases, glory is linked to virtuosity in performing the action, not to the complete attainment of the end. So it seems that there is some kind of contradiction in Machiavelli's theory of action, because sometimes it is more important to perform the "proper action", (virtuous action) than to have success. And this is a contradiction because, as we will see, the core of his definition of political action is linked to consequences, not to virtuous performance. Nevertheless, if we explore this problem, we will find some interesting things.

In the first place, we will consider what we can call a "Quixotic" conception of *virtù* in fighting against Fortune. Had Machiavelli only take into account political consequences (success), why should he analyze actions performed virtuously but defeated in the end? Why bothering in praising, say, Bruto or, for that matter, he himself? The answer is, I think, that for Machiavelli the virtuous character of the subject of political action is also very important, and this implies that fighting fortune is as important as to win. In effect, concerning politics (thinking, acting, judging) you have to strive and to do everything in your hand. And, even if you are overwhelmed by adverse fortune, you should always fight and face with courage the circumstances. If in the end you are defeated, you can always obtain honor and glory due to your character before adversity. So, you should never surrender: "[Men] should never give up, because there is always hope, though they know not the end and move towards it along roads which cross one another and as yet are unexplored; and since there is hope, they should not despair, not matter what fortune brings or in what travail they found themselves (*sperando non si abandonare, in qualunque fortuna ed in qualunque travaglio si truovino*)" (**D, II, 29**).<sup>20</sup>

It is true that Machiavelli thinks that in victory glory is usually attained (**D, III, 42**). But it is also true that he speaks with scorn about successful tyrants (**P, 8**). One reason for doing so has to do with a deeply rooted Machiavellian conviction: that tyrant's interest always are against the common good ("for what he does in his own interest usually harms the city, and what is done in the interest of the city harms him" "*...più delle volte quello che fa per lui, offende la città e quello che fa per la città, offende*

---

<sup>20</sup> This "quixotic" interpretation might also be related to existentialism. For existentialists the subject of action must confer human meaning to the universe through fighting against contingency, in spite of the fact that the "meaning" does not exist before the fight, but it is created in it. See P. Cerezo: *Las máscaras de lo trágico*, Trotta, Madrid, 1996, pp. 288 ff.

lui" -**D, II, 2**). A second and equally important reason is that those tyrants corrupt the political modes of the city, ruin the basis of communal liberty, eliminate *virtù* in citizens, do not take into account the mediation of means and ends, do not consider that means cannot destroy the very basis of political action itself, etc., and in doing so the tyrant destroy the republic. And the destruction of the republic is the destruction of the core of political action: the attainment of a common way of life that protects public liberties as well as private interests (**D, I, 16; D, II, 2; P, 21**).

Nevertheless, even if we consider from this standpoint the relationship of means and ends in Machiavelli's thought, there is still a serious problem. Citizens perform virtuous actions pursuing the common good, but in doing so, they often break the prevalent moral framework. The tension between morality and politics seems to be installed at the core of political action, no matter whether we consider it from a strategic or from a republican point of view. This fact derives from a profound conviction in Machiavelli: the distinction between the common good and justice. This distinction has been highlighted by Quentin Skinner: "... if the promotion of the common good is genuinely your goal, you must be prepared to abandon the ideal of justice" <sup>21</sup>. That is, we cannot claim that certain virtues, whether public or private (being true, being just or not being cruel), are always or often compatible with the pursuit of the good of the community, so that the subject of the action must bear the burden of this tension and assume that, at times, he will use undesirable means to reach desirable ends (from the point of view of the city) <sup>22</sup>.

Naturally, we may think that there is a mistake involved in thinking that we have to choose between these two worlds (that of justice and that of the common good). We may think that everything is possible at the same time: justice and common good. Furthermore, for many thinkers (from Cicero to Kant, from Habermas to Dworkin) justice and common good reinforce each other and we cannot consider them in any serious internal tension.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, according to Machiavelli, this choice is unavoidable and at times tragic. It is true that the choice is not between private and public worlds, between, for example, ethics (personal and linked to principles) and

---

<sup>21</sup>. See Q. Skinner: "Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Prehumanist Origin of Republican Ideas", G.Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli eds: *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, Cambridge Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup>. See, also, Q. Skinner: *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol I, Cambridge Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> For comments and criticisms on those theories see R. Del Águila: *La senda del mal. Política y razón de Estado*, Taurus, Madrid, 2000, chapters 3 and 4.

politics (collective and linked to consequences). The choice is between a life of autonomy and security, a meaningful political life, and a life of apolitical submission in which there is not even the guarantee that cruelty and injustice will be absent<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, a wrong choice would have disastrous effects for the community and for the subject(s): to avoid using unjust methods we condemn ourselves to experience situations in which we will have to use more injustice and cruelty than which would originally have been required (**P, 8**). That is, it seems Viroli is right when he affirms<sup>25</sup> that, for Machiavelli, only the institution and defense of a free political life is "worthy of a good man. Even if it requires him to do evil". Paraphrasing Pocock<sup>26</sup>, we can say that, if this is the case, the truly subversive Machiavelli is not the strategic thinker but the good citizen and the patriot.

---

<sup>24</sup>. Machiavelli's texts are clear on this point: "... an evil should never be allowed to continue out of respect for a good when that good may be easily overwhelmed by that evil" ("*non si debbe mai lasciare scorrere un male, rispetto a uno bene, quando quel bene facilmente possa essere, de quel male, oppressato*" -**D, III, 3**). So, "*chi piglia una tirannide e non ammazza a Bruto, e chi fa uno stato libero e non ammazza i figliuoli di Bruto, si mantiene poco tempo*" (*ibid.*)

<sup>25</sup>. See M. Viroli: "Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics", G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli eds: ***Machiavelli and Republicanism***, op.cit., p. 171.

<sup>26</sup>. See J.G.A. Pocock: ***The Machiavellian Moment***, op.cit., p. 218.

**TABLE 2: THE REPUBLICAN MODEL OF POLITICAL ACTION.**

<b>1. Subject (republican citizen)</b>	<b>1.1. Plurality and competition.</b>	<b>1.1.1. Related to (republican) tradition.</b>
	<b>1.2. Education through deliberation and participation.</b>	<b>1.2.1. Bound by civic virtue.</b>
<b>2. Means.</b>	<b>2.1. In formative relation to subject.</b>	<b>2.1.1. <i>Virtù</i>.</b>
	<b>2.2. In teleological (mediated) relation to ends.</b>	<b>2.2.1. Protection of <i>vivere civile e libero</i>.</b>
	<b>2.3. Tensions between Common Good and Justice.</b>	<b>2.3.1. Using undesirable means (from the perspective of morality) might be conducive to the attainment of desirable (political) ends.</b>
<b>3. Ends</b>	<b>3.1. <i>Vivere civile e libero</i>. Maintained and developed through plurality and competition, under conditions of risk and uncertainty.</b>	<b>3.1.1. So the ends are neither given, nor fixed, nor crystallised, and its attainment is uncertain and insecure.</b>

So, we can define the republican model of political action as follows:

1. Republican citizens acting in plurality and competition, in the context of the tradition of the city and bound by its civic virtue...
2. Choose, with virtù (knowledge, courage) the means (at times morally dubious) to achieve political ends and in doing so ...
3. They protect or develop a *vivere civile e libero* under conditions of uncertainty and insecurity.

### **1.3. Tragedy: the Internal Tension of Action.**

I think that the internal tragic tension in Machiavelli's theory of action is well grasped by Isaiah Berlin interpretation<sup>27</sup>. It is not, as Croce has put it, that Machiavelli emancipates politics from ethics. It is that he differentiates between two incompatible ideals of life and two different moralities. One, the political morality, is pagan and its values are courage, vigor, fortitude, public achievement, strength, and "assertion of one's proper claims and the knowledge and power needed to secure their satisfaction"<sup>28</sup>. The other is Christian morality and its ideals are charity, mercy, sacrifice, forgiveness, contempt for the goods of this world, salvation, etc. Machiavelli affirms that those who follow this second path can neither build nor maintain a *vivere civile e libero*, that is, a free and legitimate political order. So the clash between these two ethics is unavoidable and the tension it produces can only be faced by the subject of action with virtù. And, for Machiavelli, only those citizens and those republics who are virtuous in this sense can be considered adequate subjects of political action.

This interpretation reminds strongly that of Max Weber's political man<sup>29</sup>. It is well known that Weber makes a distinction between "an ethic of ultimate ends" (full of "pure intentions", and whose goal is the "salvation of the soul"), and an "ethic of responsibility", (properly political, linked to consequences and to responsibility for that consequences). In that context he wrote: "The genius or demon of politics lives

---

<sup>27</sup> See I. Berlin: "The Originality of Machiavelli", in **Against the Current. Essays in the History of Ideas**, The Viking Press, New York, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> See M. Weber: **Politics as a Vocation**, in **From Max Weber. Essays on Sociology**, H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills eds., Routledge, London, 1998, pp. 120 ff.

in an inner tension with the god of love", and also: "...both ethics are not absolute contrasts, but rather supplements –which only in unison constitute a genuine man– a man who can have the `calling of politics`".<sup>30</sup> So here, as in the case of Machiavelli, the tension between both ethics is constitutive of politics, the tragedy of choice is the more important task of those engaged in politics, and the need of a virtuous subject of political action is also regarded crucial in order to face these dilemmas.

Clearly the key words of this model of action would be: *virtù* (knowledge and courage) of the subject, tragic choice among the different courses of action, and the ends linked to the common good. I think it is also very important to underline the conviction shared by the three models of action (strategic, republican or tragic): not always "good" means produce "good" results, not always evil means produce bad results, there is no harmony in the world of politics and no way to escape this dilemmas. This can be considered the main tension pointed out by Machiavelli: the inner tension of politics and action.

Nevertheless, the task of almost everyone since the Renaissance seems to have been to eliminate the "inner tension", to reconcile the "tragic choice", to substitute (institutional) rules by (citizen's) virtues. One way of doing that<sup>31</sup> has been to recur to the concept of necessity as the guide for choice and action. Where it is "necessary", i.e. where there is, properly speaking, "no choice", the reasons of politics (survival, maintenance and empowerment) must impose themselves. Otherwise we should tend toward moral behavior and justice. This is the typical argument of the discipline of **reason of state**. Mostly from Italy, Spain, Germany and France the theorists of the *ragione degli stati*, as Guicciardini have call them for the first time, strive to build a set of rules of necessity. A set of rules which could guide us, with certainty, in choice and action, and, for that reason, could help us to overcome the tensions and contradictions of political action.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 126 and 127; also: "...in numerous instances the attainment of `good` ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of morally dubious means" (p. 121). Commenting on the close connection of Weber with Berlin pluralism of values, Berlin said: "Quando proposi per la prima volta l'idea del pluralismo dei valori, molto tempo fa, non avevo letto una pagina di Weber". See I. Berlin: ***Tra Filosofia e Storia delle Idee. Intervista autobiografiche di Steven Lukes***, Ponte Alle Grazie, Firenze, 1994, p. 71. On this problem see E. García Guitián: ***"Pluralismo y libertad en la obra de Isaiah Berlin"***, Tesis doctoral, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1997.

<sup>31</sup> This is not the only way of doing it. Modernity has also tried to dissolve these contradictions through the proper use of enlightened reason. See R. del Águila: ***La senda del mal. Política y razón de Estado***, *op.cit.*, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>32</sup> The first and canonical definition of reason of State is: "*Stato è un dominio fermo sopra popoli, e ragione di Stato è notizia di mezzi atti a fondare, conservare ed*

Needles to say that this way of thinking about politics has attained security and certainty at the expense of liberty. In fact, from reasons of State spring some of the most clear examples of cruelty and criminal behavior of Western history. And not just in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Following this path of necessity, the emancipatory tradition (jacobinism, leninism, etc.) as well as the radical nationalism, fascisms, etc. have shown the dark side of modernity.

But, besides the "generation" of cruelty, the appeal to necessity is also misguided in another sense. It is unable to produce any reconciliation, because it presupposes what should be demonstrated: that is, that there exists a "natural" or "objective" necessity and that such a necessity reveals itself in an evident way to reason (or to science or to the *avantgarde* of the chosen ones), and that to follow necessity means to sacrifice everything and everyone to it...

On this, Michael Walzer<sup>33</sup> deserves to be quoted at length. Commenting on the decision of the Athenians to destroy the city of Melos, as it was narrated by Thucydides in ***The History of the Peloponnesian War***<sup>34</sup>, he writes:

"Once the debate begins, all sorts of moral and strategic questions are likely to come up. And for the participants in the debate, the outcome is not going to be determined 'by the necessity of nature', but by the opinions they hold or come to hold as a result of the arguments they hear and then by the decisions they freely make, individually and collectively. Afterwards, the generals claim that a certain decision was inevitable; and that, presumably, is what Thucydides wants us to believe. But the claim can only be made afterwards, for inevitability here is mediated by a process of political deliberation, and Thucydides could not know what was inevitable until that process has been completed. **Judgments of necessity in this sense are always retrospective in character - the work of historians, not historical actors**" (my emphasis).

In a word, judgements of necessity can begin only when deliberation on them has finished and those concerned consider clear that certain course of action seems necessary and should be taken. If we accept that what Walzer affirms can also be

---

*ampliare un dominio così fatto*" (G. Botero: ***Della ragion di Stato. Delle cause della grandezza della città***, Arnaldo Forni, Bologna, 1990, p. 1). It should be noted that the way in which the reconciliation of tensions proceeds here has to do with the role of religion as a political device; see D. Saavedra Fajardo: ***Idea de un príncipe cristiano representada en cien empresas***, Academia Alfonso X el Sabio, Murcia, 1985, emp. 24. Also R. del Águila: ***La senda del mal. Política y razón de Estado***, *op.cit.*, chapter 1.

<sup>33</sup>. See M. Walzer: ***Just and Unjust Wars***, New York: Basic Books, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> See, 5: 84-116.

applied in the case of Machiavelli, then there is no escape from, or comfort in, political choice. Unable to base itself on any "indubitable necessity",<sup>35</sup> it does not offer us the certainty of getting it right, it does not give us solace or peace of mind. The choice is structured, properly speaking, in tragic terms. And, what is perhaps more important, the impact of deliberation, choice and action has penetrating and lasting consequences for the constitution of our individual and collective identities because it is the choice between **alternative courses of action**, not between separate spheres.

## **2. Tragedy, Justice and the Role of Compassion.**

### **2.1. Action and Uncertainty.**

To take seriously the problems of choice in the terms established by Machiavelli also means taking seriously the creation of *virtù* in the citizens. Subjected to the tension of having to decide in dilemmatic situations, the citizens form and develop their character and elaborate their capacity for judgment. But they do not do so only in the peaceful development of communicative and dialogical capacities. They do not do so exclusively in the way Jürgen Habermas or the theorists of deliberative concept of democracy suppose. They do so **also** through the experience of the tragic conflict. We can define this conflict in terms of the formulations given by Martha Nussbaum<sup>36</sup>: in the cases of tragic conflict "we see wrong action committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person [or a community] whose ethical commitments would otherwise dispose him [or them] to reject the act. The constraint comes from the presence of circumstances that prevent the adequate fulfillment of two valid claims".<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Of course necessity plays an important role on Machiavelli, but it is not understood in a merely technical way. See, *D, I, 32; D, I, 38; D, III, 11; P, 18; P, 25*; etc. Also F. Guicciardini: *Considerazioni in torno ai Discorsi del Machiavelli*, a cura de Corrado Vivanti, in N. Machiavelli: *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, Einaudi, Torino, 1983, Book I, Chapter 1. Also, R. Del Águila: *La senda del mal*, *op.cit.*, pp. 97 ff. Anyway, for the relation between necessity and "anthropological pessimism" in Machiavelli see *P, 18; D, I, 3; Scritti Politici en Tute le Opere*, cit., p.12; hereafter *SP*; etc.

<sup>36</sup>. See M. Nussbaum: *The Fragility of Goodness. Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge Mass: Cambridge University Press, p. 25.

<sup>37</sup>. Nussbaum then quotes Socrates' belief (*Euthyphro*, 8a) that this collision is repugnant to reason. Modernity has considered the tragic conflict to be equally repugnant, as can be seen in its mechanisms to reconcile that tension: from the already mentioned concept of necessity, to the enlightened idea of the essential harmony between reason and nature, to the idea of progress or of history as justification for present contradictions, etc. In fact, as Nussbaum again shows (*ibid*, p. 35), "such situations might be repellent to practical logic; they are also familiar from the experience of life".

Furthermore, as I already mention, the tragic conflict does not mean to choose between spheres or values or groups of values that are placed there, before us, at our disposal. We choose between **alternative courses of action**. Nor do we choose between static and given identities (here, a just but politically irresponsible man; there, a politically responsible but at times unjust man). We choose between **courses of action** that will make us different according to the choices we make, according to our deliberation and decision, according to the resulting action and the way in which we will experience and remember the whole process.

Therefore it is political action itself which acquires a tragic tone. In fact, Aristotle defined tragedy precisely in this way: "Tragedy is an imitation not of human beings but of **action and life**", its effect being to arise fear and compassion in the spectator<sup>38</sup>. The relation between tragedy and action, found in many places in the work of the Greek thinker <sup>39</sup>, is an integral part of a civic education in participation and politics. Hannah Arendt <sup>40</sup> links the tragic character of action with the courage and determination necessary to appear, speak and act in the public sphere, as well as with the uncertainty of the ultimate consequences of such appearance, speech and action. In both cases she highlights the impact that contingency has on action and, in turn, the impact that action has on the self-identities of the individual and of the community. In this sense, a virtuous action (guided by knowledge and courage) is above all risk and exposure to Fortune (as Machiavelli would say).

Modernity always tried to minimize this risk in two ways. The first one is the attainment of "rational mastery" over human affairs (of which a good example is the application of strategy to politics, the concept of necessity and the discipline of reason of State). The second one is to grant to action a justification which, *a posteriori*, could give solace to the subject of action and reconcile him/her with his own self-image (that is, to avoid the tragic character of action and choice through the power of, say, Reason or Science or Progress or History -in capital letters). We can argue about the contribution of Machiavelli to the development of the first way (though I think his

---

<sup>38</sup>. See Aristotle: *Poetics*, in *Aristotle Theory of Poetry and the Fine Arts*, English translation S.H. Butcher, New York: Dover Publications, 1955, parrs. 1450a9 and 1452a. My emphasis.

<sup>39</sup>. See J. Jones: *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980, pp. 24ff.

<sup>40</sup>. See H. Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 184ff.

contribution is just indirect). But concerning the second one ("harmonization"), this is just what Machiavelli did not do.<sup>41</sup>

So, if we leave aside those modern narratives of reconciliation, if we assume the impact on our identities that the tragic conflict has, and the need of "collective sharing of responsibility" when that conflict is lived in contexts of democratic participation<sup>42</sup>, then maybe we might be able to learn something from it.

Greek tragedy offers us, in this regard, some crucial examples. Agamemnon is not reproached by the Chorus for having chosen to sacrifice Iphigenia in order to satisfy the demands of the gods and of the Trojan expedition. What the Chorus reproaches to Agamemnon is the **way** in which he lives and experiences that tragic conflict: without a single word of sorrow, without any painful memory of his decision<sup>43</sup>. Supposing that the decision was completely justified and that nothing else could have been done, Agamemnon forgets the reasons and justifications that inclined him towards not committing the ritual assassination. Agamemnon does not learn because he forgets and, thus, fails as a human and rational being in his confrontation with the conflict: forgetfulness silences arguments that were crucial in judgment and decision.<sup>44</sup>

It is said that Hannah Arendt was preparing the third volume of her trilogy (*Thinking, Willing, Judging*) just before her death. A few notes were found on a sheet of paper in her typewriter,<sup>45</sup> among which a phrase of Cato stands out as one of the

---

<sup>41</sup> One of the curious coincidences between Th. Hobbes and I. Kant is the idea that what makes science or reason better than prudence is that science and reason dispel uncertainty and risks, and would give us security and truth: see Th. Hobbes: *Leviathan*, C.B. Macpherson ed., Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1968, Chapter 46; I. Kant: *Political Writings*, H. Reiss ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p.80.

<sup>42</sup> See J.P. Euben: "Introduction" and A.J. Podlecki: "Polis and Monarch in Early Attic Tragedy", in J.P. Euben ed: *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>43</sup> See M. Nussbaum: *The Fragility of Goodness*, op.cit., pp. 36ff.

<sup>44</sup> We can say it with Montaigne: "when an urgent circumstance (...) induceth a Prince for the necessity of his state, or, as they say, for state matters, to breake his worde and faith, or otherwise forceth him out of his ordinary duty, he is to ascribe this necessity (...) But if he did it sans regret, or scruple, if it greaved him not to doe it, 'tis an argument his conscience is but ill" ("*...s'il le fit sans regret, s'il ne lui greva (pesa) de la faire, c'est signe que sa conscience est en mauvais terms*"). See M. de Montaigne: *Essais*, I, II, and III, P. Michel ed., Libraire Général Française, Paris, 1972; English version J. Florio, Everyman Library, Dutton, New York, 1965. Book III, Chapter 1.

<sup>45</sup> Preparatory writings exists on the topic of Judgement, and some of which are

last sentences of the manuscript: "*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni*" ("The victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato"). To keep the defeated cause alive through memory in political judgment, to remember the costs of the decision, what was left behind in the course of action and possibly will not be recovered but nonetheless deserves to preserve its claim on us, this lies at the heart of an adequate experience of the tragic conflict. This is the form in which virtuous citizens will assume their education in participation. The exercise of political judgment in this type of situation does not only require strategy as logical craftiness, but also a proper balance before tragic choices. A balance that would make us aware of the unavoidable tensions in the world of politics. To put it in another way: to remember the defeated side of political judgment, as well as to remember and to feel concern for the victims of our actions, are both politically important in two senses. First, they make us aware of what we are doing. Second, they make us consider many things differently in the future. So through remembering we got knowledge and experience. But for doing so properly we need not only to remember, but to remember well, that is, to balance the imperatives of closeness and compassion with those coming from the foundation and transformation of a free political order. <sup>46</sup>

## **2.2. Compassion, Tragedy and Machiavelli.**

According to these criteria, was Machiavelli a tragic thinker? Was he sensitive to the defeated side of political judgement? Did he balance adequately compassion and

---

published. Cfr. H. Arendt: ***Lectures on Kant Political Philosophy***, R. Beiner ed, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982; R. Beiner: "Hannah Arendt on Judging", in *ibidem*; R. Beiner: ***Political Judgement***, London: Methuen, 1983. See also: R. Beiner: ***What is the Matter with Liberalism?***, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1992, pp. 99 ff.

<sup>46</sup> May be I should mention, in passing, an example of this kind of balance: the art of silence in transitions to democracy. I think this is a good example of tragic choice under conditions of uncertainty, which is quite usual in the real world. In this case, the tragic choice would be between: 1. to do justice and to put the victims first, prosecuting and castigating the guilty tyrants or, 2. being prudent (for reasons of political stability), to silence these moral considerations (postponing them, respecting them) setting aside justice for the maintenance and development of common good (democracy). So if we are to choose tragically and properly, in these cases we cannot apply the general rule: we always have to put justice first. Even if "*la sagesza repubblicana insegna (...) che per conservare un vivere civile (...) è necessaria la massima severità nel punire i cittadini che si rendono responsabili di rante colpe, soprattutto se si tratta di cittadini importanti, ben noti, potenti*" (M. Viroli: ***Republicanism***, Laterza, Bari, 1999, pp. 90-1). No matter that Machiavelli wrote about the necessity of "*esecuzione memorabile*" (***D, III, 1***), his teachings, underlining the crucial importance of the *vivere civile*, would incline us to choose the survival and development of the common good (say, democracy) even if we have to sacrifice (to postpone) justice.

detachment in political action? Did he experience the tragic choice “properly”? If one is to believe Berlin, he was not and he did not. No matter that:

1. he uncovers the fact that ultimate values often are not compatible with one another;
2. for him evil remains evil, good, good, cruelty, cruelty;
3. he never showed any intention of “transvaluing ” their current meanings (as, for instance, Nietzsche, Hegel, Mussolini or Lenin tried to do);
4. he never invokes any theological sanction (god, history) to obscure this fact;
5. no matter that he knows that to choose an ethics is to give up the other;
6. and so every choice we make, in a sense, entails a lost;
7. no matter that he elaborates the elements of the tragic choice and juxtaposes the different outlooks and, since then, nothing has been the same in European Political Theory.

Berlin affirms that Machiavelli can not be considered a tragic thinker because he never faces this situation (from 1 to 7) with anguish. In fact, there is no trace of agony in his writings and it seems that for him there is no deep conflict: “he chooses his side, and took little interest on the values [or the people, RdA] that this choice ignore”.<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand Benedetto Croce thinks that Machiavelli feels deep bitterness for the cruel conditions of politics, craving for a society of pure and good men. So for him the Florentine is a tragic thinker in whom he perceives open signs of an austere and painful moral conscience.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, Maurizio Viroli has recently vindicated an interesting interpretation for Machiavelli’s smile. His would be a smile that hides weeping and conceals pain, a defense before the meanness and malignity of this world. Not only a way of facing live, but also a way of living it.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> See I. Berlin: “The Originality of Machiavelli”, *op.cit.*, p. 70. Also: “One chooses what one chooses because one knows what one wants, and is ready to pay the price” (p.75); “He... takes for granted the superiority of Rome *antiqua virtus* (...) over the Christian life” (p. 77).

<sup>48</sup> See B. Croce: ***Etica e Politica***, *op.cit.*, pp. 205-6: Machiavelli would experience “*acre amarezza*” (...) “*T’anelito del Machiavelli va verso un’inattigibile società di uomini buoni e puri*” (...) in him is clear the existence of “*aperti segni di un’austera e dolorosa coscienza morale*”.

<sup>49</sup> See M. Viroli: ***Il sorriso di Niccolò***, Laterza, Bari, 2000, pp. 143, 159, 169, 254, etc: “*un sorriso che nasconde il pianto (...)* una difesa che protegge dagli sguardi, sconsolato e rassegnato di fronte a la malignità dil mondo”(…) “*Un sorriso che muore sulla labra e nasconde il dolore*” (...) “*il suo modo di difendersi della vita (...)* anche il suo modo di immergersi in essa”.

So, Berlin considers that Machiavelli is not a tragic thinker because he sees no evidence of compassion or of moral doubt in his writings. Since compassion and doubt seems to be for Berlin unavoidable features of the proper experience of tragedy,<sup>50</sup> and since he thinks Machiavelli is too much ironical to be compassionate, he concludes that our Florentine Secretary is not a tragic thinker. On the other hand, Croce and Viroli consider him a tragic thinker precisely because they interpret Machiavelli's irony as a way of expressing moral disgust before the cruel condition of the world. May be for Croce and Viroli, as a lawyer would say, "the absence of evidence (of compassion) is not evidence of the absence (of compassion)". Anyway, the discussion about motives and intentions in Political Theory are rarely conclusive. In fact we need a different approach to this issue. An approach that let us analyze the relationship between irony, compassion and political action.

In first place, it is plain truth that Machiavelli could not be considered a compassionate thinker. But, for that matter, there are no many thinkers that could. Neither so disparate thinkers as Nietzsche and Kant. As Aurelio Arteta has pointed out, in Western thought, compassion is a virtue under suspicion.<sup>51</sup>

According to Kant, a rational person will not accept any favours, since mutual respect requires a certain distance and charitable compassion buries us in moral heteronomy and, like disease, spreads by contagion. In this process, compassion serves to mask the injustice and the lack of respect for the person who is suffering and is often accompanied by inaction and political and moral lethargy. This is why it can be said that if justice reigned in the world (the goal which Kant thinks we should aspire to) compassion would be unnecessary.

For Nietzsche, on the other hand, if suffering humiliates the victim, our compassion endows us with superiority. In this way, when we see someone suffering we happily seize the opportunity to "take control of him/her". Whoever is the "object" of this sentiment of compassion, s/he may well feel humiliated and rejected because the piety of others reveals his/her own prostration. By accepting it, the sufferer shows to be worthy only of disgust. That is, the pious degrade us.

If what both these authors are saying makes any sense, then we need to make certain changes in the conception of compassion if we are to vindicate it as an integral

---

<sup>50</sup> In that he would agree with Aristotle: see footnote 38.

<sup>51</sup> See A. Arteta: *La compasión. Apología de una virtud bajo sospecha*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1996. For Kant's and Nietzsche's opinions on compassion see pp. 65 ff, 87 ff, 216 ff, etc.

part of political action and tragedy. We have to convert indignation, sentimentalism and charity into commitment, empathy and solidarity.

In his *Poetics* (1452b) Aristotle states that the compassion which tragedy provokes in us was due to the fact that the person who was suffering was doing so unjustly, as well as because s/he was someone "like us". From this perspective, compassion is, therefore, a bridge towards others, a form of understanding them as fellow human beings. In the same way, Jean Jacques Rousseau observed in *Emile* how reflection on the misfortunes of others exposes our own vulnerability. This is what Aurelio Arteta called the "nutritive soil of piety": our own human vulnerability. Compassion, therefore, is the piety and fear derived from reflection on our similarities with the sufferer.<sup>52</sup>

But similarity (with the sufferer) is not equality. In the empathy which comes from compassion there is always a sharp sense of separation and difference with respect to the situation of the sufferer. Adopting the perspective of a reflexive observer, compassion seeks to understand the conditions, causes, etc., of suffering. As Martha Nussbaum notes<sup>53</sup>, the misfortunes of others can only be appreciated and judged through reflection which relates them to what we already understand. Aurelio Arteta, in turn, observes that piety "enters into the order of virtue when it is the product of reflexive knowledge and practice". And this reflexive practice makes compassion a tragic virtue in two senses. Firstly, because it springs from a knowledge of human tragedy. Secondly, because it must renounce to formalism and neutralism and always remains conscious of the possibility of error.<sup>54</sup>

Thus if we want to overcome Kantian and Nietzschean critiques, then direct experience of tragedy in action must be accompanied by reflection and rationality. And this could mean that commitment, empathy and solidarity should be understood as part of a civic education capable of teaching us to choose between alternative courses of political action without being guided exclusively neither by our "immediate" sentiments and feelings nor by an "objective rule", that make for us unnecessary to choose.

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40 and 42.

<sup>53</sup> See M. Nussbaum, "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion", *Social Philosophy and Practice*, 13, 1 (Winter 1996), pp. 34 ff.

<sup>54</sup> See, Arteta, *La compasión*, *op.cit.*, pp. 138-39. Arteta only refers to the first tragic component of the virtue of compassion, and only very indirectly to the second (pp. 258 ff.).

But, whatever our re-reading of compassion, we will not be able to find it in Machiavelli's writings. It is true that part of Machiavelli's teachings have to do with "cooling down immediate sentiments" in political action, but this does not incline him toward commitment, empathy and solidarity with the victims, except in an indirect way (for instance: in order to get a reasonable just political order that decreases the prevalent amount of cruelty, you have to act cruelly). I think Isaiah Berlin is right in this. Furthermore, Berlin argument is not exactly that Machiavelli shows no compassion for the possible victims created by choosing a political morality instead of a Christian one. What Berlin says is that Machiavelli forgets completely the defeated side of the political judgement (that is, the reasons that would incline us to choose the opposite course of action). But Berlin, in turn, forgets the possible reasons why Machiavelli thinks he should set aside compassion and the defeated side of political judgement. These Machiavellian reasons could be related to the necessity to act. Perhaps, in order to decide on a position which identifies the political problems which are at stake, which considers alternative courses of action to remedy the situation (defined by insecurity, cruelty, and injustice), we need to postpone compassionate considerations. Because compassion can be paralyzing of political action since it implies the identification with everybody<sup>55</sup> (at least in the Christian reading Machiavelli wants to escape). To put it in a nutshell: if compassion is defined through "our common human vulnerability", then it is directed equally at both the just and the unjust person, at those who create the cruel condition of the world and at those who suffer it. If you want your action to produce (good) political consequences you have to detach yourself from this universal identification with everybody. You should distance yourself from the concrete pain you create intervening in the world in order to change it. So, several tragic facts are underlined by Machiavelli: to act is to take side, to take side is to be partial and to set aside (partially, temporally) compassionate (and universal) considerations, thanks to political action we can decrease the prevalent cruelty<sup>56</sup> ... etc. And it is from these "tragic facts" that would arise Machiavelli's ironical solution. That is, Machiavelli chooses irony, rather than compassion, as the key concept of political action.

---

<sup>55</sup> See A. Arteta: *La compasión...*, op.cit., pp. 140 ff, 192 ff, etc.

<sup>56</sup> Nowhere in Machiavelli's works does one find any precept to inflict "unnecessary" or gratuitous cruelty. So one should refer in this context to the principle of an economy of violence as guiding principle of Machiavelli's teaching. (See S. Wolin: *Politics and Vision. Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960; also *IF, II, 36, 37*, etc.) Conversely, if cruelty is linked in Machiavelli to necessity, we already know that the concept of necessity is open and, therefore, allows one to redefine it constantly. What may appear to be necessary to the Florentine, might not be so for us. But it is equally difficult to think politically without reference to "what is necessary", no matter how flexibly we construe its limits. The key point here is that necessity does not provide comfort or solace, but force us to think and to act with courage in a world of uncertainty.

Thus, I think that, though it is useless to try to make Machiavelli a compassionate thinker, it is very important not to forget the reasons for considering Machiavelli the founder of a particular way of tragic thinking, which is clearly connected with irony and detachment.

### **3. Tragedy and the Risks of Irony.**

#### **3.1. Irony and Cruelty: the Case of Machiavelli.**

Machiavelli tries to establish a political knowledge which will break with tradition assuming an ironical and critical distance with respect to the current political modes. In this sense to forget and to detach oneself seems to be an integral part of politics: forgetfulness of conventions, forgetfulness of the prevalent links between morality and politics, detachment from the current discourses about power and legitimacy.<sup>57</sup> To gain ironical distance respect the given structures of politics means something similar to what Socrates did in Athens, but with a very different intention. In Machiavelli's case, the intention is structured not by the philosophical question "Know yourself!", but by the political problem "How to found and maintain a *vivero civile e libero*". The difference is clear. As Federico Chabod says, Machiavelli's demon is his "*furor politico*",<sup>58</sup> not any transcendental moral, god or religion who could help the individual to "care of himself". Machiavelli puts politics first.

But, for doing so, the first thing we need, so he thinks, is to gain distance from the usual answers (behave morally, never break the rules, comply with principles), and to think in a new way. That is, to think from the point of view of a kind of "forbidden knowledge": at times you have to behave immorally, to break the rules and to forget principles if you want to be free (and to be politically free is, for Machiavelli, the basis of any other personal liberty). But to take this path, the path of evil, is to take the path of distance (from the -concrete- community), of forgetfulness (from the -given- tradition), and of amnesia (from -current moral- principles).<sup>59</sup> And what is odd is that the "forbidden knowledge" is extremely imprudent (you can not speak about it openly, as

---

<sup>57</sup> For instance, *D, I, pr; P, 15; ;* etc.

<sup>58</sup> See F. Chabod: *Scritti sul Machiavelli*, Giulio Einaudi, Torino, 1964, p. 383.

<sup>59</sup> Amnesia is, in fact, silence. So the art of political amnesia is, at least in part, the art of silence. The art of silence, because to forget or not to forget, is not at subject's disposal, but to silence some facts or moral principles in the public sphere in order to protect liberty is always an open possibility, as I already mention commenting on transitions from authoritarian rule.

Leo Strauss would say), and at the same time requires a lot of prudence (that which is needed for establishing the foundation of a free political order). And prudence, precisely, is the key for knowing what to “forget”.

The virtuous subject of political action must be a subject capable of deciding what to “forget” (that is, to silence) and what to remember (and to elaborate). S/he should be able of assuming risks and consequences, capable of avoiding the complacent self-deception involved in adopting some peculiar mechanism of reconciliation (“it’s not me who chooses, but god, or reason, or science, or necessity or ethnic authenticity, etc) It is clear, that this double-edge function (to silence and to elaborate) is meant to create political liberty. In this sense, this kind of *virtù* is what a republican community needs in order to deliberate collectively and adequately over the alternative courses of action, over the common good and justice, over tragic choices. So, according to this, political judgment must combine both distance and experience, memory and forgetfulness, criticism and silence, political distance and closeness, detachment and sympathy<sup>60</sup>, and this seems to be possible through the adequate experience of the tragic conflict: compassion to foster our solidarity and our commitment but also the proper use of irony, criticism and detachment.

Irony is needed to change the world. Nevertheless, the main attraction of irony is at the same time its defect. Indeed, irony may be defined by its abrasive character, by its "enthusiasm for destroying", its "divine madness" that "does not leave stone upon stone".<sup>61</sup> This aspect of irony produces within it a movement of detachment from actuality and hence from the community in which it originates.<sup>62</sup> Nothing supports irony, and this allows it to do with great efficacy its critical and destructive function. But, precisely because of this, irony tends: 1. to suspend "what is constitutive of actuality, that which orders and supports it: that is, morality and ethics"<sup>63</sup>; and 2. to distance itself from the concrete community of human beings. (As with Socrates that through his teachings defied the current morality in Athens and Athenian democracy.)

So irony is also a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it grants us the critical distance which we need in order to avoid being dragged by the current. It allows us to

---

<sup>60</sup>. See R. Beiner: *Political Judgement*, *op.cit.*, pp. 102ff.

<sup>61</sup>. See Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, pp.261-2.

<sup>62</sup>. Kierkegaard writes: "Irony is free, free from the sorrows of actuality, but also free from its joys" (*ibidem*, p.264).

<sup>63</sup>. *Ibid*, p.283.

transform ourselves and to transform politically those aspects of reality which we find intolerable even though the prevailing values and vocabularies do not consider them so. It allows us to ironically recapitulate the costs of the tragic choices we face, and, in this way, to experience the limits and shortcomings of our ways of life. But, in order to do that, irony submits the existing cultural codes to such a destructive process that it may impede sympathy for the community of concrete persons in which it originates. It is as if irony remains perpetually encapsulated, isolated, "outside" the context of the shared. This is what it means to say that irony and common sense are opposites.<sup>64</sup>

The political risk of public irony vis-à-vis the tragic choice is, therefore, the distance that the ironic judgment maintains with from its "object". This risk is evident in some of the Machiavellian solutions to the different problems produced by the tension between common good and justice. The ironical distance gained by Machiavelli with respect to the prevailing vocabularies of justice in his world (Christian morality), permits him to counsel political actions of extreme cruelty and charged with injustice for their victims.<sup>65</sup>

The insecurity, uncertainty and cruel laws of the goddess Fortune define, for Machiavelli, a political context characterized by an absence of trust in which the unexpected is also dangerous. Irony presents itself, in this case, as a weapon against dependency and servitude, against heteronomy and slavery. By escaping the prevailing vocabularies that tried to account for, and reconcile, this situation, Machiavellian irony must confront the fact that the use of cruelty may be (and often is) a recourse against the prevailing and menacing cruelty and injustice. The model which is chosen to give form to this kind of reflection is that of consequentialist judgment, that is, judgment in accordance with the results of the action.

For Machiavellism as well as for strategic thinking, the Machiavellian lesson is summed up in the idea that "the end justifies the means". The obligatory quote is the following: "It is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects, and that when the effect is good (...) it always **justifies** the action" (*D, I, 9*, my emphasis). Here one should note the urgency with which the English translator makes Machiavelli say that such an action is justified. Yet, in fact, the term used by the

---

<sup>64</sup>. See R.Rorty: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.74.

<sup>65</sup> See, for instance, *P, 7; P, 15; P, 18*; etc. On appearances and fraud, that is, on what has been called "*l'illusionnisme politique*" of Machiavelli, see L. Vissing: *Machiavel et la politique de l'apparence*, PUF, Paris, 1986. Also *D, I, 35; D, III, 3; D, III, 17; D, III, 21*; etc.

Florentine writer is not "justify", but, in moral terms, the more tragic and less comforting one of "excuse": "*accussandolo il fatto, lo effetto lo scusi; e quando sia buono (...) sempre lo scuserà*".<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, another crucial quote on this topic says: "For when the safety of one's country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious. On the contrary, **every other consideration being set aside**, that alternative should be wholeheartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the freedom of one's country" (*D, III, 41*, my emphasis). Here again, the Italian words corresponding to the emphasized phrase are: "*postposto ogni altro rispetto*". That is, the terms used by Machiavelli are "postponed" and "respect". There doesn't seem to be much solace or comfort in this. Whereas to postpone something means to recover it afterwards, to respect something means that is compulsory to pay attention to it. So, a certain tragic tension is maintained in the words "postponed" and "respect", in spite of the force with which Machiavelli recommends the alternative course of action derived from ethics of responsibility, to put it in Weberian terms.

But, in spite of the tragic nuance that one may want to introduce here, the Machiavellian solution has its price. And that price is, again, the silence about the victims that are sacrificed for the sake of the political end that is pursued. In fact, consequentialist judgment (when it occurs in connection with an ironical subject) counsels setting aside the voice of the victims and their suffering. It is as if irony turned against itself and argued, for example, that the subject who makes use of it should avoid any empathy with the victims that constitute the "cost" or the defeated side of the ironical judgment.<sup>67</sup>

It seems to me that this price or, rather, the risk of having to pay this price, is more pertinent to the Machiavellian theory than the famous Straussian thesis on Machiavelli as the teacher of evil. As we already know, what is tragic in the teaching of Machiavelli is not that it turns evil into goodness, but rather in that it tries to make us aware of the **political** limits of goodness, of the deep relationship between good and evil, of the good (political) outcomes that evil may produce.

---

<sup>66</sup>. See the similar comment made by Q. Skinner: *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, I, op.cit., p.184.

<sup>67</sup> It is this what Kafka tries to tell us?: "He found the Archimedian point, but he used it against himself; it seems he was permitted to find it only under this condition".

The tragic Machiavelli, Machiavelli in his best moments, is acutely aware of the necessity of action as well as of the tension between common good and justice, and he does not attempt to reconcile them or to invoke a theological 'justification' so as to find solace and comfort. For Machiavelli the real problem is not the reconciliation of this tension, but what type of subject can bear this situation and survive. That is, what type of *virtù* would be preferable in a republican community in order to allow for both the exercise of irony and the survival of political bond.

But all of this, no doubt, does nothing to change the fact that the terms of the problem, as they are set out in Machiavelli's teaching, connect cruelty and injustice we do to others with nothing less than what happens to be **necessary** to obtain political autonomy and freedom. And the problem is, as I already mention, that a certain later revolutionary tradition has found in these teachings a fertile ground for connecting the cruel exercise of irony with the transformation of political conditions in an allegedly emancipatory sense. For a certain discourse of modernity, the point was to exercise cruelty and injustice on the concrete community, justifying these actions through the concepts of necessity or of the irresistible progress of peoples or of our search for (ethnic) authenticity or of the infallible march of history, whilst it usually scorned the tragic conflict.<sup>68</sup> The political consequences of this focus on the problem are well-known and do not require further explanation.

But even if we abandon this tradition of thought, we still have to handle with much care Machiavelian teaching, because it is rather true that, if one is to believe him, very often the foundation or maintenance of a free political order could have a moral cost: to do evil under certain circumstances. Furthermore, together with the connection between good and evil, autonomy and cruelty there is the link between liberty, discipline, and power. To say it with Gennaro Sasso: "*Dove infatti c'è libertà ... ivi conviene che sia anche potenza ... [and, on the other hand,] la condizione della potenza è ... la libertà*".<sup>69</sup> Everything seems to be internally connected and, so to speak, there is no

---

<sup>68</sup>. In Hegel one can see some of these traits. Thus, with respect to tragic conflict: "The self-consciousness of heroes (like that of Oedipus and others in Greek tragedy) has not advanced out of its **primitive simplicity** either to reflection on the distinction between act [*Tat*] and action [*Handlung*], between the external event and the purpose and knowledge of circumstances, or to the subdivision of consequences. On the contrary, they accepted responsibility for the whole compass of the deed." (G.W.F. Hegel: *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, English translation by T. M. Knox, London: Oxford University Press, 1967, par.118, my emphasis.)

<sup>69</sup> See G. Sasso: *Niccolò Machiavelli*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1980, pp. 553-5. Also, *D, II, 2*. Against this see M. Vatter: "The Machiavellian Legacy: Origin and Outcomes of the Conflict Between Politics and Morality in Modernity", *European University Institute, Working Papers*, SPS 99/2.

innocent political position. There is no escape from the deep seated interrelationships that often exist between good and evil, irony, autonomy, and cruelty, liberty and disciplines, power and justice.

### **3.2. Domesticated Irony?**

It is probably because of these dangerous connections that the pragmatic liberalism of Richard Rorty opts for a solution to this dilemma which consists, literally, in **domesticating irony**. The Rortyan ironist knows that her permanent doubts about the inherited vocabulary constantly induce her to redescribe herself and everything that surrounds her in new terms. She also knows that "redescription often humiliates" and that this fact is incompatible with our liberal democratic *ethos* which defines itself by considering the cruelty inflicted on others "as the worst thing we do".<sup>70</sup> Therefore Rorty argues for the need to use irony in a limited and specific territory, namely, in the private sphere: only private irony leaves a space for liberal hope.

Thus, the continuous doubts of the ironist with respect to the prevailing liberal vocabulary, her conviction about the contingency of the liberal community and its language, her knowledge of the power of redescription,<sup>71</sup> must not contaminate the principles of solidarity that have to support the functioning of the public sphere. In this sphere the goal is no other than the increase of our solidarity, of our sensibility towards humiliation, of our identification with the strange and the alien, of our sympathy and closeness with the victims, in short, of our liberal-democratic culture and values. On the other hand, the private sphere is the sphere of ironical self-creation, of the search for the sublime, of the transformation of the self and the constant recreation of our individual identities. In short: the liberal-ironist believes in liberal common sense for the public and in irony and recreation for the private.

---

<sup>70</sup>. See R. Rorty: **Contingency, Irony and Solidarity**, op.cit., p.90, also pp.xv and 146, etc. The definition of the liberal as a person who "put[s] cruelty first" comes from J. Shklar: **Ordinary Vices**, Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p.44: "It seems to me that liberal and humane people (...) if they were asked to rank the vices, put cruelty first. Intuitively they would choose cruelty as the worst thing we do". Also p.2: cruelty is "intolerable for liberals, because fear destroys freedom". Also A. Arteta: **La compasión. Apología de una virtud bajo sospecha**, op.cit.. And, of course, the source of all that: M. De Montaigne: **Essais**, op.cit.

<sup>71</sup>. See Rorty: **Contingency, Irony and Solidarity**, op.cit., pp.73-74: "I call people of this sort 'ironists' because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position Sartre called 'meta-stable': never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves".

It has been pointed out that this distinction is problematic, among other reasons because of the impossibility of distinguishing clearly between the public and the private.<sup>72</sup> Although I still think that this is correct, it is not the main difficulty with the Rortyan strategy. The main problem is not that such a distinction is impossible, but rather that it is not even desirable.

In the first place, it seems that nowadays the risk does not lie with irony. The risk is not that we may all turn into Machiavellistic, cruel ironists in the style of O'Brien in Orwell's *1984*. Certainly cruelty plays a very important role today in political alternatives such as radical nationalism, or fundamentalism of several kinds, or neo-fascism, racism, xenophobia, etc.<sup>73</sup> So it is not that Rorty is completely wrong in fearing some kind of *1984* if we let irony and detachment to "circulate freely" in the public sphere. I think, nevertheless, that all these alternatives have lost the normative battle with the values and beliefs of liberal-democracy. Normatively speaking, when they want to justify themselves, they use (and abuse) certain key values that belong to democracy. When they want to justify exclusion, racism, xenophobia, or whatever, they refer to values such as "self-determination", or "the right to be different", etc. That is the reason why I think that in our apathetic democracies, the main risk of irony lies elsewhere.

When tragic political judgment is deactivated, when it is reconciled or hidden from the population, when the prevailing vocabulary steels itself against irony, when the tensions and limits of our collective identity vanish through a sleight of hand, that is, when the ironical distance disappears from the public world and we are left with the conventions of common sense, then the risk is that the citizens of our liberal democracies will become characters of another negative utopia, no less famous than the one cited above. The risk is that they will become inhabitants of the *Brave New World* of Aldous Huxley, shielded against tragic tensions and their political consequences thanks to generous doses of **soma**.

---

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, R. del Águila: "Emancipation, Resistance and Cosmopolitanism", *New School for Social Research. Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 18, n.1, 1995.

<sup>73</sup> No doubt, there is also a lot of cruelty in real liberal democracies (inequalities, poverty, domination, etc.) That is the reason why, as we will see soon, we can not eliminate irony and criticism from the public sphere. But the normative ideals of liberal-democracies are, precisely, that cruelty should be eliminated, whereas normative ideals of the rest of alternatives I have mentioned put first some other value (authenticity, "salvation of the soul", etc.)

So to keep the public sphere free of irony, and to routinize the vocabulary in terms of the existing liberal codes is also risky. Namely, no political order, no vocabulary, no matter how open and flexible (and thus not even our liberal-democratic vocabulary), permits the description in adequate terms of **any possible** cruel, unjust and humiliating trait in communitarian practices. In other words, "no order can enable everything to flower in the same garden: this is a 'necessary injustice', as Nietzsche would put it, within the practices of justice".<sup>74</sup> Or, "no political system can satisfy the discontents and differences the social condition creates within and between us".<sup>75</sup>

That is, if every collective identity (if our liberal-democratic identity) generates differences, tensions, divisions and limits by the mere fact of its constitution, may be irony will allow us to have access to a dimension of the contingency of our community capable of politicizing these differences and tensions and open a space where we can give them public expression. It may be the case that public irony and the admission of the contingency of our liberal democratic community and its vocabulary has no better breeding-ground than the consequent experience of tragic conflict and tragic choice properly combined.<sup>76</sup>

In other words, this problem has two different aspects: 1. autonomy and liberty entails risks (if we were to fully and blindly assume its attainment at any cost it would lead us towards some form of tyranny<sup>77</sup>); but 2. abandoning its search would leave us helpless before slavery and dependency. Paraphrasing Michel Foucault, we could say that any course of action is dangerous, but that does not exempt us from the necessity of deciding and acting.<sup>78</sup> Machiavelli's words on this are well known: "I believe, believed,

---

<sup>74</sup>. See W.E. Connolly: ***Identity/Difference. Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox***, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991, pp.159-160.

<sup>75</sup>. See J. Shklar: ***Faces of Injustice***, New York and London: Yale University Press, 1990.

<sup>76</sup> Though I have no space to explain in detail the differences, I would like to underline the fact that these tragic dilemmas are to be distinguish from J. Gray's Agonistic Liberalism and Samuel Huntington's Clashes of Civilization. In my view, both theories are too much closely connected with the primacy of culture over politics. See, J. Gray: "Agonistic Liberalism", ***?????????***; S. Huntington: ***The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order***, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.

<sup>77</sup>. The ***Bacchae*** of Euripides "(...) takes some of our fondest, noblest aspirations, such as liberation and objectivity, shows their power, attractiveness, and necessity, but also their powerlessness, partiality, and fictiveness. Against and with Foucault, it implies that liberation, like false consciousness, can be given up at the risk of becoming a slave and only embraced at the risk of being a tyrant". (P. Euben: ***The Tragedy of Political Theory. The Road not Taken***, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, p.48.)

<sup>78</sup>. The words of Foucault are: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that

and always shall believe that what Boccaccio says is true: that it is better to act and regret, than not to act and regret anyway" ("*è meglio fare et pentirsi, che non fare et pentirse*" -**Lett.**, Francesco Vettori, 25/2/1514).

#### **4. Final Remarks: Was Machiaveli a Tragic Thinker?**

Machiavelli's theory of political action cannot be understood exclusively in strategical terms. This sort of interpretation would force us to understand Machiavelli's theory as the story of an isolated and unbound subject pursuing whatever ends at whatever moral cost. Or of a tyrant who tries to create, to maintain, and to develop his/her power at any price. Or of whoever is capable of thinking and acting setting aside any moral considerations and focusing him/herself on the technical problems for reaching whatever goal s/he considers appropriate. I have suggested that the main source of this kind of political action in Machiavelli's writings is to be found in his profile of the new prince. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that some texts do not support this interpretation since they link the new prince with a specific political end: the common good of the subjects. Thus, though merely strategic thinking can learn a lot reading Machiavelli, it would impoverish our understanding of the Florentine to read him in exclusively strategical terms.

This is the reason why I have analyzed the transformation that "strategy" experiences when it is understood "inside" the republican reading of Machiavelli. In this case, the goal of action is strongly political: the creation and development of a free political order. The attainment of this political goal is considered to be shared by virtuous citizens acting in plurality and competition. So the subject(s) of political action cannot be neither "isolated" nor "unbound", but rather closely related to the fellow citizens and deeply concerned about republican traditions. Furthermore, they should be virtuous and capable of learning through participation about the joys and the costs of the art of creating, maintaining, and developing their common liberty. Thus, the attainment of a *vivere civile e libero* is not the "technical outcome" of the functional choice of proper means. In the republican reading, means mediate ends, that is, they are conducive to the end but part of the end themselves. So means are to be considered not only from a technical perspective, but also from an immanent one: they should never eliminate the conditions for the flourishing of some values and institutions

---

everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy, but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism". ("On Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress", in: ***The Foucault Reader***, edited by P. Rabinow, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 343).

(virtuous citizens, free institutions, good laws...) Precisely because of that, wherever you fight, and fight well, to reach the proper political goal through the proper means, you will be praised, even if you are defeated. You should never surrender, despite misfortunes and even “despite consequences”(!) (for your comfort, for your life, for your immediate interests). Because virtuosity in action is so crucial in this reading, I have called it a Quixotic conception of *virtù*.

Nevertheless, we soon discover that still those republican citizens have to perform actions against current morality to protect the common good (that is, to protect the attainment of the supreme political goal). So we have to re-read the republican interpretation of Machiavelli’s theory of political action from a tragic point of view: that of the collision between justice and common good.

Both justice and common good embody a different ethical standpoint. So the problem should not be understood in terms of static spheres or realms (clearly separated, self-referentially ordered, etc.), but rather in terms of choosing between alternative courses of action from different perspectives. A virtuous subject of action who identifies properly the common good is also aware of the fact that in pursuing a particular course of action at times s/he has to perform actions which may be considered to be against current morality. If s/he is to put common good first, then may be s/he has to “postpone” justice and to “excuse” some moral transgressions. The use of moral dubious means is not justified, but only excused, by the attainment of certain consequences (consequences which integrate principles: the creation, maintenance, development of a legitimate political order). Good and evil, power and justice, common good and morality, disciplines and liberties, autonomy and cruelty, etc., are so deeply intertwined as to prevent any attempt to separate them neatly. This is the internal tension which is at the core of Machiavelli’s theory of political action. An internal tension which has produced a “wound” in Western political thought.

**TABLE 3. THE TRAGIC MODEL OF POLITICAL ACTION**

<b>1. Subject (Founder or Republican Citizen)</b>	<b>1.1. Education Through Tragic Choices</b>	<b>1.1.1. Proper Balance Between Compassion and Irony</b>
		<b>1.1.2. Proper Balance Between Remembering (Defeated Side of Political Judgement &amp; the Victims) and Silence.</b>
<b>2. Means</b>	<b>2.1. Transgression of Current Morality</b>	<b>2.1.1. Alternative Courses of Action</b>
		<b>2.1.2. Common Good and Justice.</b>
	<b>2.2. Consequentialist Judgement.</b>	<b>2.2.1. "Scusare" and "Postponere"</b>
		<b>2.2.2. Good and Evil Intertwined</b>
<b>3. Ends</b>	<b>3.1. <i>Vivere civile e libero.</i> Maintained and developed through plurality and competition, under conditions of risk and uncertainty.</b>	<b>3.1.1. So the ends are neither given, nor fixed, nor crystallised, and its attainment is uncertain and insecure.</b>

To summarize, according with the tragic model of political action:

1. A virtuous subject of action (founder of the republic or republican citizen)...
2. is capable of identifying properly the common good and the needs of the political community and...
3. is also capable of identifying and choosing among the alternative courses of action (which are tragically in conflict with morals and with one another) that, in the midst of contingency and risk, may be conducive to the ends pursued.
4. Besides, s/he is aware of the close and disturbing connections that exist between justice and power, good and evil, autonomy and cruelty, etc. and of the fact that these deep seated connections produce an unavoidable wound in political thought and action.

In fact, many efforts have been made to heal that wound. The discipline of reason of State, the concept of necessity, etc. are but some of them. Also different attempts have been made from concepts such as “scientific certainty”, “rational mastery”, “unavoidable progress of humanity”, etc. All of them may be considered working in the same direction: to avoid the tragic conflicts and to substitute them by an indubitable rule coming from the perfect harmony of the world.

This is completely anti-Machiavelian. For him action is linked to uncertainty and risk, and the proper question is not how could we dispel them, but what kind of political subject and what type of political *virtù* are needed to face this situation. We are installed in a world of tragic choices that can be neither ordered nor justified by any theological sanction (neither by god, nor by reason, nor by necessity, science, progress or history). So the concrete experience of tragic conflict appears to be crucial. The experience of tragic conflict shows the limits and fragility of our ways of life, of the vocabularies in which we express them, of the political space in which we order them. And this remains true even in our times, that is, even in the times of hegemony of liberal democracy. It is the experience of tragic conflict which permits us to combine compassion and irony, to empathize with victims and to criticize the prevalent political arrangements.

But, after all we have been saying, could we consider Machiavelli as a tragic thinker? Does he think in tragic terms? Does he experience and learn from tragedy in the way we are vindicating? It seems to me that we can now answer these questions directly. We can find in his works the following reasons to consider him so:

1. Good and evil are intertwined; goodness has political limits; evil may produce good political outcomes; even a free political order has a moral cost; individual and collective

autonomy may need moral transgressions to be created, maintained and developed.

2. Ultimate values are often not compatible with one another. There are circumstances that prevent the adequate fulfilment of two valid claims. To choose is tragic because we cannot guarantee that what we are choosing is self-evident or perfect (right, just, true, necessary, etc.) Nevertheless, we can offer arguments and reasons that support the tragic choice we have made (to offer this sort of arguments and reasons is precisely what Machiavelli did in his works).

3. Machiavelli never tries to “transvaluate” values: evil remains evil; good, good; cruelty, cruelty. He invents no “theological” sanction (god’s will, unavoidable historical necessity, etc.) to hide this fact. He does not try to give us solace saying that is someone else who choose or that the choice would have no moral or political costs for us.

4. In choosing a course of action (under uncertainty, contingency and risk) we have to give up the other. Every tragic choice entails a loss. Nonetheless we have to choose. Choice is unavoidably linked to human political condition (this is what liberty is about).

5. Ends do not justify means. At most, ends “excuse” the use of certain means under certain circumstances. Besides, moral considerations about means are not eliminated, but “postponed”.

For all these five important reasons Machiavelli is clearly a tragic thinker. Nevertheless we can find also two reasons to deny him that title:

1. He did not face this situation with anguish. He never showed compassion for the possible victims the (tragic) choice might create.

2. He took little interest on the reasons which would incline us to choose differently, that is, he took little interest on the “defeated side of political judgement”.

It seems to me clear that these two reasons “against” considering Machiavelli a tragic thinker do not really answer the question we are posed, but rather this other one: “how does Machiavelli experience the tragic choice? Does he experience it in the ‘proper way’?”. If we think the ‘proper way’ is to be understood following Aristotle (compassion) and Arendt (defeated side of political judgement), then it seems that he does not experience it properly. He does not seem to fit the aristotelian-arendtian theories of tragedy. Or, better, he does not show clearly those emotions needed to be consider as experiencing properly tragic choices (if we are to follow that tradition of thought).

Of course, we can turn to Nietzsche looking for an alternative in experiencing tragedy and trying to establish if Machiavelli might be interpreted in a Nietzschean way.

As is well known, Nietzsche considers a mistake to link tragedy, as Aristotle

does, to “two depressive effects”, namely, compassion and fear. In his view, the proper way of facing tragedy would be that we become heroes and “in the midst of tragic horror say to [ourselves] ‘yes’, [since we are] hard enough to feel suffering as pleasure”<sup>79</sup>. This idea (this transvaluation of emotions) is connected with *amor fati*, love of fate, that is, with seeing “as beautiful what is necessary in things”<sup>80</sup>. It is also related to another basic assumption: “what does not destroy me, makes me stronger”<sup>81</sup>, and, possibly, with what has been called a “secret alliance between joy and pain”<sup>82</sup>.

I do not see any possibility of interpreting Machiavelli following this track. None of these ideas is relevant in Machiavelli’s work. Unless we get rid of some of the metaphysical flavor they have (fate, etc.) and we consider Nietzsche as saying, more or less, the following: any experience involves pain, suffering, change, death, etc.; but to reject this is to deny existence as such, so our task is to make that suffering active and turn it into a way of “organizing power as agency”.<sup>83</sup> In this case, Machiavelli could agree on making suffering active, on considering power as the basis of human agency, and also on the need of a certain detachment of compassion in order to build that agency. We already know that the route Machiavelli chooses to make this possible is that of irony. It is through irony, detachment and criticism that the Florentine thinks we can transform the world. And this is the reason why some (i.e., Berlin) denies him the title of “tragic thinker”. He would be too much ironic and critic with the prevailing political arrangements to be compassionate. After all, if compassion is directed to everybody, since it is based in our common human vulnerability, what we need is not that, but to take side and to fight in order to transform the given situation. It is true that this links irony to cruelty and both to the transformation of the world. But, what could be consider more tragic than that? What could be more tragic that the tension that springs from the relation of compassion, irony and transformation of the world ? It is not tragic to state that irony and detachment from compassion are needed in order to

---

<sup>79</sup> See F. Nietzsche: *The Will to Power*, english version W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, Random House, New York, 1967, pars. 851-2.

<sup>80</sup> See F. Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, english version W. Kaufmann, Random House, New York, 1974, par. 276.

<sup>81</sup> See F. Nietzsche: *Twilight of Idols*, in *Portable Nietzsche*, english version W. Kaufmann, Penguin Books, New York, 1954, par. 465.

<sup>82</sup> See C. Rosset: *Joyful Cruelty*, english version D.F. Bell, Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 1993, p. 30. Also M. Heidegger: “Tragedy, Satyr-Play, and Telling Silence in Nietzsche’s Thought of Eternal Recurrence”, in *Why Nietzsche Now?*, D. O’Hara ed., English version D. Farrel Krell, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1985, pp. 25 ff.

<sup>83</sup> See M. Warren: *Nietzsche and Political Thought*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1988, pp. 190 ff.

act properly and to transform the given? It is not tragic to affirm that moral transgressions are here to stay and that no matter what we feel about them, they will remain with us? It is not all these the best examples of Machiavelli being a tragic thinker? True, once posed the problem Machiavelli does not solve it. But, Should he? It is it a *conditio sine qua non* for tragedy to know in advance that there is a "solution" to it? Quite the contrary.

And precisely because he does not solve the problem he can be consider properly speaking, a tragic thinker, that leave us the responsibility for choosing, for the quantity and quality of transgressions, for the balance between irony and compassion, etc. So, like Odiseus we sail between Carydbis and Scylla. We have to avoid the world of irony unbound, the world of cruelty represented by Orwell's negative utopia, **1984** and some contemporary implacable political alternatives (from communism to fascism and radical nationalism). But we ought also to avoid the complacent, impeccable and self-indulgent world of **Brave New World**, with enough *soma* to make citizens "happy" and slaves at the same time.<sup>84</sup> Machiavelli's theory tries to work inside this tension and, at his best, might help us to do the same. Wary as we should be of a certain European form of doing politics that has made our continent the "daughter of excess",<sup>85</sup> may be we need to create a proper balance through the combination of compassion and irony to breed our political judgement. Because it is through judgement, prudence and practical knowledge that we have to face the main tragic choices in our political world.

---

<sup>84</sup> This is, I think, one of the dangerous developments of liberal democracy today.

<sup>85</sup> The expression is Albert Camus' in the following context: "Greek thought always takes its stands upon the idea of limit (...) Our Europe, on the contrary, is the daughter of excess (...) [But] Nemesis is watching, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance. All those who go beyond the limit are by her pitilessly chastised". (***Selected Essays and Notebooks***, edited and translated by P. Thody, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, p.136.)