

Il Pensiero Storico

Rivista internazionale di storia delle idee

Fondata da Antonio Messina

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... la causa della difficoltà della ricerca della verità non sta nelle cose, ma in noi. Infatti, come gli occhi delle nottole si comportano nei confronti della luce del giorno, così anche l'intelligenza che è nella nostra anima si comporta nei confronti delle cose che, per natura loro, sono le più evidenti di tutte.

Aristotele, *Metafisica*, II

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Logica e polemica. La scienza politica di Giovanni Sartori

a cura di
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‘Machiavellian Democracy’ against Republicanism: in the light of Machiavelli’s Philosophy of Life

FRANCESCO MAIOLO

Abstract

Niccolò Machiavelli is the thinker of *insecuritas*. The philosophy of precariousness that he held was one that is tragic in different, even contradictory, senses. On the one hand, Machiavelli was convinced that all things are in motion and cannot stay steady. So, they must either rise or fall. In this sense, decay is inevitable. At the same time, the vision of the inevitability of decay is paradoxical for if everything is precarious, decay too must be so. We are left with a philosophy of precariousness centered upon decay’s inevitability in which decay itself logically escapes the hammer of precariousness. On these grounds we address and answer the question of whether Machiavelli can be seen as a forerunner of democracy and populism, and whether his thought can be taken as a model for the consolidation of popular government.

Keywords: *Niccolò Machiavelli, John McCormick, Machiavellian Democracy, Republicanism, the Cambridge School*

Introduction

Niccolò Machiavelli is one of the most widely studied authors of Western political thought. Every year dozens of essays about his work are published. New or updated biographical accounts continue to appear¹. As Gennaro Sasso noted, «we are never done with Machiavelli»². How to explain this enduring interest? Several answers can be given, which are not mutually exclusive, even though none of them settle the matter. Machiavelli generated diverging interpretations, which coalesced in a growing repertoire of formulas or clichés. The latter became a source of dispute in their own right: the “master of evil” and “preceptor of tyrants”; the unmasker of the *arcana imperii*; the crea-

¹ See U. DOTTI, *Machiavelli rivoluzionario. Vita e opere*, Carocci, Roma 2003; R. BLACK, *Machiavelli. L'uomo, il politico, il letterato*, trad. it. L. Refe, Viella, Roma 2022 (ID., *Machiavelli*, Routledge, London-New York 2013); S. LANDI, *Lo sguardo di Machiavelli. Una nuova storia intellettuale*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017; A. LEE, *Machiavelli. His Life and Times*, Picador, London 2020; M. VIROLI, *Il sorriso di Niccolò. Storia di Machiavelli* (1998), Laterza, Roma-Bari 2024.

² G. SASSO, *Su Machiavelli. Ultimi scritti*, Carocci, Roma 2015, p. 11.

tor of the State as a work of art; the diplomat concerned about Florence's decay; the patriot who first promoted the unification of Italy as an independent State; the thinker of the autonomy of politics from morality; the thinker of the absoluteness of politics; the prototype of the modern revolutionary who understood the importance of class conflict; the father of *raison d'État*; the founder of modernity and of the science of politics; the forerunner of the Enlightenment; the avenger of pagan wisdom; the anatomist of politics as technology; the champion of the crowd at the level of theory; the defender of republican liberty³. Machiavelli continues to baffle and divide his readers. The circumstance helps us understand why «the temptation to pursue him beyond the grave» to judge his ideas is irresistible⁴.

Among the most recent formulas⁵, one by John McCormick catches the eye: Machiavelli as a forerunner of democracy and populism⁶. This thesis is the critical target of my essay. It is one especially debated in Anglophone scholarship, although it is not new altogether⁷. As a scholar in political philosophy with an interest in genealogical research here I present a sketch of critique based upon the assumption that Machiavelli's philosophy of life constitutes a solid ground for asserting that he was neither a democrat nor a populist. My interest in Anglophone scholarship does not imply that scholarship in Italy or elsewhere is, or has become, of secondary importance. Rather I wish to contribute to a debate developed within the former on the basis of findings

³ See I. BERLIN, *The Originality of Machiavelli* in ID., *Against the Current. Essays in the History of Ideas* (1979), ed. H. Hardy, Pimlico, London 1997, pp. 25-79; G. PROCACCI, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea dell'età moderna*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1995; J. BARTHAS, *Machiavelli in Political Thought from the Age of Revolution to Present* in J.M. NAJEMY (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, pp. 256-273; A. CAMPI, *Machiavelliana. Immagini, percorsi, interpretazioni*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2024.

⁴ Q. SKINNER, *Machiavelli* (1981), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 98.

⁵ Alexander Lee described the *Segretario fiorentino* as a «radical conservative». See A. LEE, *Machiavelli*, cit., pp. 425-426. For Robert Black he was a pragmatic thinker who eventually embraced the conservatism typical of a phase of life in which youth's radicalism is gone. See R. BLACK, *Machiavelli*, cit., pp. 27-28, 88.

⁶ J.P. MCCORMICK, *Machiavellian Democracy. Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism*, in «The American Political Science Review», vol. 95, n. 2, 2001, pp. 297-313.

⁷ Antonio Negri described Machiavelli as a «prophet of democracy» and the *Discorsi* as an «apology of the people». See A. NEGRI, *Il potere costituente. Saggio sulle alternative del governo* (1992), Manifestolibri, Roma 2002, p. 91 (ID., *Insurgencies. Constituent Power and the Modern State*, transl. by M. Boscagli, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2009). For a critical reaction to Negri's approach see P.P. PORTINARO, *Le mani su Machiavelli. Una critica dell'«Italian Theory»*, Donzelli, Roma 2018. See also C. LEFORT, *Le travail de l'oeuvre. Machiavel*, Gallimard, Paris 1972; L. ALTHUSSER, *Machiavelli and Us*, transl. by G. Elliot, Verso, London-New York 1999.

from the latter, provided that everywhere diversity marks Machiavelli scholarship, by now an intricate body of works difficult to explore and master.

Some methodological remarks are due, even if just a few words do not do justice to the complexity of the matter. First, trying to show that Machiavelli was not a democrat and a populist amounts to endeavouring to understand both Machiavelli's beliefs and the beliefs on the basis of which McCormick in particular took what he needed from Machiavelli and subsumed it into scholarly investigation. This double perspective is at the heart of Weberian «value analysis»⁸. Secondly, as Benedetto Croce emphasized, it is always an interest in «the life of the present» that moves to the investigation of the past⁹. Deconstructionist authors generally treat admonitions of the kind as a proof that the incommunicability gap between texts and interpreters can only be bridged through an endless process of interpretation in which the *intentio lectoris* is all there is and that matters¹⁰. Yet, commitments to particular interests of today can be an incentive and a condition for a comparatively improved interpretation of past texts. To this effect, even misinterpretation may be useful¹¹. I believe that identifying and assessing the impact of certain basic human passions on socio-political belief and action can help making sense of current as well as past affairs and of reflexion thereafter. In Machiavelli's thought passions play a role of paramount importance with regard to explaining socio-political belief and action, past and present. If we examine how he spoke of pride, selfishness, lust, ingratitude, brutality, envy, jealousy, and avarice, we feel he was talking about *our* passions. Here comes my third remark. Resemblances like the one in question may raise significant questions about continuity and discontinuity in the history of thought. Surely, this type of resemblances does not indicate that *all* questions the Florentine thinker addressed are identical to *all* questions addressed today to make sense of passions in relation to belief and action.

The questions Machiavelli addressed as an interpreter of current affairs and of the lesson of the past are not identical to the questions addressed by scholars concerned with his thought. With Quentin Skinner, it is worth stressing that studying past authors assuming that their work is “a repository of political wisdom” to be learned and applied to our world – a practice that Machiavelli defended – leads to interpretative absurdities. It is only fair to argue

⁸ M. WEBER, “Objectivity” in *Social Science and Social Policy* (1904), in ID., *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, transl. by E.A. Shils, H.A. Finch, Free Press, New York 1949, pp. 49-112, 80-81, 86-87, 92-95, 103-104.

⁹ B. CROCE, *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1915), a cura di G. Galasso, Adelphi, Milano 2011, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Contra* see U. ECO, *I limiti dell'interpretazione* (1990), La nave di Teseo, Milano 2016, pp. 29-56.

¹¹ M. (LESLIE) CANOVAN, *In Defence of Anachronism*, in «Political Studies», vol. 18, n. 4, 1970, pp. 433-447.

that we should not treat past thinkers as though they had a coherent view, or something to say, about the problems of our times¹². In this vein postulating total incommunicability between us and past thought is intellectually abusive. The incommunicability thesis maintains that resemblances between present and past can be given all possible meanings. They can be significant and insignificant at the same time. This appealing ambivalence easily leads to the kind of silencing of discussion which betrays an assumption of infallibility. Hence, we can grasp past authorial intentionality as well as the principles that past authors devised to determine the courses of action they believed they could successfully pursue, even if their professed principles operated not as their true motives, but as justifications of their behaviour¹³. We can elucidate the meaning of the utterances in the texts we study. The former can always be conveniently related to both the linguistic conventions of the time in which the latter were composed and the debates that followed. We can recognize what it was that past authors were doing in saying what they said¹⁴. This goal is easier to achieve, Robin Collingwood suggested, if we are open to consider that truth and falsehood do not belong to propositions as such. The latter constitute a body of knowledge but only together with the questions they are meant to answer. So, the meaning of propositions is relative to the questions one tries to answer¹⁵.

Machiavelli the forerunner of democracy and populism

Gabriele Pedullà recalled that in *Defence of the Constitutions and Government of the United States of America* (1787-1788), John Adams, who served as the second president of the USA from 1797 to 1801, described Machiavelli as the founder of a «plebeian philosophy»¹⁶. According to C. Bradley Thompson, Adams was unique among the Founding Fathers in that he took seriously Machiavelli. He was «the restorer of reason» in matters of politics and of classical republican institutions. In his eyes Machiavelli was a «revolutionary republican». Adams praised Machiavelli for defending – inconsistently - the “mixed” constitution. At the same time, he failed to recognize the importance of a “fixed” constitution. Machiavelli cannot be blamed for not knowing the

¹² Q. SKINNER, *Visions of Politics* – vol. I (*Regarding Method*), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 57-89.

¹³ ID., *Liberty before Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 105.

¹⁴ ID., *Regarding Method*, cit., pp. 103-127, 116-117.

¹⁵ R.G. COLLINGWOOD, *An Autobiography* (1927), ed. S. Toulmin, Clarendon Press Oxford 2002, pp. 29-43.

¹⁶ G. PEDULLÀ, *Machiavelli in Tumult. The Discourses on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, transl. P. Gaborik, N. Rybakken, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 2n.

separation of powers' development. Yet, he did not understand "the need to mix and balance in the legislative branch the one, the few, and the many". Moreover, he was much more pessimistic than Adams as to whether the cycle of revolution could be arrested. Adams believed that it would be possible to end the cycle. In Machiavelli the solution to the blows of Fortune was "political", whereas in Adams was «constitutional»¹⁷.

In a certain sense McCormick creatively elaborated on Adams' notion of Machiavelli as the founder of a «plebeian philosophy»¹⁸. With a view to democracy in the USA, McCormick argued that the crisis of democratic government is due to the fact that the latter is reduced to free and fair elections. Democracy being the rule of the people, by the people, for the people, the mere expansion of the right to vote does not lead to effective popular rule. Society's wealthiest members exercise excessive influence over law and policy making. According to McCormick, popular rule can only be secured if mechanisms of elite control are established. In the *Discorsi* Machiavelli mixed representative institutions based upon election with more direct forms of elite control. On this basis his political theory can function as a model for the democratization of our liberal political systems.

The *stato popolare* Machiavelli referred to (I, 2, 3; I, 3, 3; I, 4-5) is one in which government is organized in such a way that no authority is vested either in a few powerful men or in one man. The elites are always reluctant to share power and offices with ordinary citizens. Their desire to dominate is stronger than their desire to further the common good. That is why the populace should "despise and mistrust" them and "actively confront the injustice that elite governing inevitably entails". Elite control is to be achieved through institutional agencies and arrangements available to the populace only, capable of monitoring and curbing the power and the arrogance (*insolenzia*) of the elite whenever the latter puts in danger the liberty of the former¹⁹. McCormick criticized the Cambridge School for its "inattention" toward both the inherent elitism of traditional Republicanism and Machiavelli's preference for anti-elitist class struggle²⁰. By contrast, he sought to revive Machiavelli's (al-

¹⁷ C.B. THOMPSON, *John Adams's Machiavellian Moment*, in «The Review of Politics», vol. 57, n. 3, 1995, pp. 389-417, 391, 398, 413, 415-416.

¹⁸ If McCormick were to find himself at odds with Adams' fundamental distinction between the political and the constitutional, as I believe, the similarities between McCormick's understanding of the political and Negri's are notable. I found no references to Adams' and Negri's interpretations of Machiavelli respectively in the part of McCormick's work I have knowledge of. See A. NEGRI, *Insurgencies*, cit., pp. 37-97. In the same vein see F. DEL LUCCHESI, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2015.

¹⁹ J.P. MCCORMICK, *Machiavellian Democracy. Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism*, cit., p. 311.

²⁰ See J.P. MCCORMICK, *Machiavelli against Republicanism. On the Cambridge School's "Guicciardinian Moments"*, in «Political Theory», vol. 31, n. 5, 2003, pp.

leged) “forgotten lesson” that the *grandi* are the major threat to liberty in republican regimes, «not the purported ignorance, apathy, and caprice of common citizens».

Since electoral models of democracy appear to encourage political and economic elites to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary citizens and encroach upon their liberty, constitutional measures and institutional mechanisms and techniques that old popular governments devised in order to control the elite ought to be revalued. McCormick saw Machiavelli as the great defender of republics in which the people «vigorously contest and constrain» elite behaviour by extra-electoral means. His political theory was «popularly participatory and empowering». Thus Machiavelli was a genuine democrat, not a republican in the sense envisaged by the Cambridge School. Common citizens must have the chance to «discuss and directly decide public policy». In order to do so the following institutional mechanisms are needed: offices and assemblies excluding the wealthiest citizens from eligibility; magistrate appointment procedures combining lottery and popular vote; political trials in which the entire citizenry acts as ultimate judge over prosecutions and appeals. McCormick acknowledged Machiavelli’s concern about the possibility that ordinary people may usurp liberty through either «descent into license» or resort to a prince. Yet, in his view the Florentine thinker was convinced that the people «never attempt to usurp liberty without first being provoked to do so by patrician oppression and conspiracies» (I, 28; I, 46)²¹.

615-643, 617. The critical literature on the Cambridge School grew over the years. See, among others, I. SHAPIRO, *Realism in the Study of the History of Ideas*, in «History of Political Thought», vol. 3, n. 3, 1982, pp. 535–578; M. JURDJEVIC, *Hedgehogs and Foxes. The Present and Future of Italian Renaissance Intellectual History*, in «Past & Present», vol. 195, 2007, pp. 241-268. See also respectively A. BROWN, *Demasking Renaissance Republicanism*; C.J. NEDERMAN, *Rhetoric, Reason and Republic: Republicanisms – Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*; P.A. RAHE, *Situating Machiavelli*, in J. HANKINS (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism. Reappraisals and Reflections*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, pp. 179-199, 247-269, 270-303. Neal Wood emphasized Machiavelli’s anti-elitism claiming that the history of “conflictualism” in Western political thought begins with Machiavelli. See N. WOOD, *The Value of Asocial Sociability: Contributions of Machiavelli, Sidney, and Montesquieu*, in «Bucknell Review», vol. 16, 1968, pp. 1-22. See also F. DEL LUCCHESI, *Tumulti e indignatio. Conflitto, diritto e moltitudine in Machiavelli e Spinoza*, Ghibli, Roma 2004.

²¹ McCormick warned that his Machiavellian Democracy project is a «thought experiment». See J.P. MCCORMICK, *Machiavellian Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. vii-ix, 3-4, 7, 48, 51, 188. See also ID., *Reading Machiavelli. Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements and the Virtue of Populist Politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford 2018; ID., *Aristocratic Insolenzia and the Role of Senates in Machiavelli’s Mixed Republic*, in «The Review of Politics», vol. 83, n. 4, 2021, pp. 486-509.

According to Arlene Saxonhouse, it is less interesting to ask whether McCormick got Machiavelli right than whether the lesson he gathers from the latter can lead to a more democratic world, one in which «we rely less on the vote and more on protest as the resource to avoid repression»²². Michelle Clarke too believes that Machiavelli's political thought is fundamentally anti-elitist. The struggle of the *popolo* against the *grandi* is "definitional" to republican identity and achievement. The arrogance of the latter is always more dangerous to republican liberty than the license of the former²³. In Christopher Holman's view, Machiavelli contributed to the edification of a radical democratic theory, providing a unique defence of popular rule. Machiavellian democracy is a regime in which "all citizens are able to actualize their potential for political creation". Political equality can only be achieved through the establishment of economic equality. Achieving the latter in turn depends on the elimination of the *grandi* as an organized social class. The recognition of the *grandi*'s proclivity to resist the sharing of political power should lead us to question the earnestness of the ideal of the mixed constitution, which in fact is a catalyst of the elite's insatiable appetite for wealth and domination²⁴.

The view of Machiavelli as a defender of popular rule is to be found also in the work of Mario Martelli and Francesco Bausi respectively. Both these scholars argued that with his removal from the Second Chancery in the winter of 1512-1513, Machiavelli turned into a supporter of the Medici, abandoning republican ideology which he considered inapt at fighting corruption and restoring true civil and political life in Florence²⁵. John Najemy, who emphasised the important role that social conflicts played in Machiavelli's political theory, argued that the latter never ceased to be radical in his convictions and never gave up the idea that in order to survive the Florentine republic had to

²² A.W. SAXONHOUSE, *Do We Need the Vote? Reflections on John McCormick's Machiavellian Democracy*, in «The Good Society», vol. 20, n. 2, 2011, pp. 170-183, 181.

²³ M.T. CLARKE, *Machiavelli's Florentine Republic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 12, 14.

²⁴ C. HOLMAN, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2018, pp. 4-10, 205, 212.

²⁵ According to Martelli the early signs of Machiavelli's dismissal of republican ideology can be traced back to the *Discorso sulla milizia a cavallo* (1510) and to the *Ricordo ai Palleschi* (1512). See M. MARTELLI, *Machiavelli e Firenze dalla Repubblica al Principato*, in J.-J. MARCHAND (a cura di), *Niccolò Machiavelli politico, storico, letterato*, Salerno Editrice, Roma 1996, pp. 15-31 (now in M. MARTELLI, *Tra filologia e storia. Otto studi machiavelliani*, a cura di F. Bausi, Salerno Editrice, Roma 2009, pp. 35-51, 36, 50-51); ID., *Preistoria (medicea) di Machiavelli*, in «Studi di Filologia Italiana», vol. 29, 1971, pp. 377-405. According to Bausi the theory of mixed government Machiavelli presented in the *Discorsi* was the end-point of a slow process of revision and correction of his democratic, anti-aristocratic, ideology. See F. BAUSI, *Machiavelli*, Salerno Editrice, Roma 2005, pp. 89-90, 215-216, 309-310.

rid itself of the Medici²⁶. More recently, Mark Jurdjevic maintained that in several key passages of the *Discorsi* Machiavelli subverted his own models. He undermined the notion that he was offering a “programmatically and unqualified” Republicanism. The latter was not static, but changed over time. Throughout his major work Machiavelli “revealed doubts” suggesting that he was “still revising his fundamental convictions”. Eventually, he came “noticeably closer” to Venetian republicanism. On these assumptions Jurdjevic suggested to use an expression that does not imply a single affiliation: “hybrid Republicanism”²⁷. Maurizio Viroli refuted all these views, arguing that if the turn toward the Medici rule ever took place, surely was temporary and followed by another turn back to Republicanism. Machiavelli’s last writings – the *Sommario delle cose della città di Lucca* (1520), the *Discursus florentinarum rerum* (1520-1521), the *Minuta di provvisione per la riforma dello stato di Firenze l’anno 1522*, and the *Istorie fiorentine* (1526) – testify that he was neither a Medicean nor a democrat. According to Viroli, had Machiavelli pursued the elimination or marginalization of the *grandi*, in his projects for constitutional reforms he would have never assigned to them lifetime tenure in restricted and powerful councils. The mixed form of government that Machiavelli finally proposed may not be earnest, Viroli noted, but it was the best constitutional solution he could offer to “the problem of curbing and controlling the *grandi*’s insolence”. Machiavelli was aware that there is no such a thing as a perfect or permanent solution to social and political problems. Conciliatory agreements and compromises are precisely the solutions that Machiavelli offered to social conflicts. Machiavelli never abandoned Republicanism²⁸.

²⁶ Machiavelli’s ambivalence regarding the Medici is a crucial feature of his writings. The Medici were «both friends and foes, simultaneously the cause of his downfall and his imagined rescuers, the obstacle to his continued involvement in politics and yet central players in his recurring dreams of political reform and renewal». See J.M. NAJEMY, *Machiavelli and the Medici. The Lessons of Florentine History*, in «Renaissance Quarterly», vol. 35, n. 4, 1982, pp. 551-576, 553-554.

²⁷ M. JURDJEVIC, *Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism*, in «The English Historical Review», vol. 122, n. 499, 2007, pp. 1228-1257, 1236, 1256-1258.

²⁸ M. VIROLI, *Neither Medicean nor Populist. A Defense of Machiavelli’s Republicanism*, in «Machiavelliana», vol. 1, 2022, pp. 133-181, 162-164, 165, 167. See also J. BARTHAS, *Machiavelli costituzionalista. Il progetto di riforma dello Stato di Firenze del 1522*, Viella, Roma 2023. According to Pedullà we should not speak of a balance of forces or of a tensely-balanced equilibrium between the nobles and the commons as the Cambridge School historians do. Rather, he contends that the Roman magistracies portrayed in the *Discorsi* «do not stabilize each other». If anything, «they test each other». Machiavelli does not mention this balance because he prefers to emphasize the dynamic process rather than the final result. At the same time, for Pedullà it is not possible to conclude with McCormick that in Machiavelli the people exhibit an oppressive appetite only in response to the oppression inflicted upon them

A sketch of a critique of Machiavellian Democracy

Did Machiavelli consider the nobility to be more dangerous than the commons? If this were the case, did he unconditionally assign the guardianship of republican liberty to the commons alone? If this were the case, was Machiavelli a democrat and a populist? In various occasions Machiavelli referred to the two basic dispositions (*dua umori diversi*) that are found in every community. The *populo* is everywhere anxious not to be dominated and oppressed by the *grandi*, whereas the latter seek to dominate and oppress the former. These opposite dispositions bring about one of the three forms of government: principality, republic or democracy (*o principato o libertà o licenza*)²⁹.

If we turn to Machiavelli's radical and innovative understanding of social struggles, we see that in his opinion those who condemn the quarrels between patricians and plebeians in republican Rome do not realize that all legislation favourable to liberty is brought about by the clash between those social groups. Surely, it is the unquenchable appetite for oppression that drives the nobility's efforts to accumulate wealth, monopolize offices, and gain honours. That is why the tumults that led to the creation of the tribunes, which gave the populace a share in government, deserve the highest praise. Yet, Machiavelli adds, it may be asked (*si è dubitato*) into whose hands it is best to place the guardianship of liberty. His doubting here is of crucial importance. He says that if we appeal to reason (*se si andasse dietro alle ragioni*), arguments may be found in support of either thesis. Instead, if we ask what the result (*il fine*) was, the answer will favour the *nobili*, for the freedom of Sparta and of Venice lasted longer than did that of Rome. Reason also tells that in the nobility there is a great desire to dominate and in the *ignobili* the desire not to be dominated. Consequently, the latter will be more likely to support liberty. Their hope of usurping dominion over others will be less than in the case of the *nobili*. So that if the *ignobili* were to be made the guardians of liberty, it is reasonable to suppose that they will take more care of it, and that, since it is impossible for them to usurp power, they will not permit others to do so. This is how the situation looks like according to reason.

On the other hand, placing the guardianship of liberty in the hands of the nobility has one particular advantage: it prevents the restless minds of the people (*animi inquieti della plebe*) from acquiring a sense of power, which is the cause of endless squabbles and trouble in a republic, and is enough to drive the nobility to desperate measures which in the course of time have dis-

by the *grandi*. See G. PEDULLÀ, *Machiavelli in Tumult*, cit., pp. 123-124, 141n. See also ID., «*Umori*» e «*tumulti*», in *Machiavelli*, a cura di E. Cutinelli-Rendina, R. Ruggiero, Carocci, Roma 2018, pp. 225-243.

²⁹ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Il Principe*, IX, a cura di G. Inglese, Einaudi, Torino 1995, p. 63.

astrous effects. According to Machiavelli, it remains doubtful (*stare dubbio*) which to select as the guardians of liberty, for it is impossible to tell which of the two dispositions is more harmful in a republic, that which seeks to maintain an established position or that which has none but seeks to acquire it. The solution to this riddle most likely depends on whether one has in mind a republic that leads to the founding of an empire, and by so doing it loses its original republican features, or one that seeks to maintain the *status quo*. The appetites of both social groups might easily become the cause of great disturbance. Machiavelli concedes that such disturbances are more often caused by the nobility, since the fear of losing what they have arouses in them the same inclination we find in those who want to get more, given that men are inclined to think they cannot hold securely what they have unless they get more at others' expense.

The corrupt and grasping attitude of the nobility arouses in the minds of the commons the desire to have, either to revenge themselves by stripping the former of their wealth, or that they may share in those riches and honours in regard to which they deem themselves to have been badly used by the other party³⁰. While discussing the case of Giano Della Bella, a late thirteenth century Florentine politician who led the popular revolt bringing in the *Ordinanze di Giustizia* which entrenched the power of the guilds by excluding aristocrats from power in Florence, in the *Istorie fiorentine* Machiavelli restated that two are the dispositions that in all communities naturally prevail between the nobles and the commons, and that naturally they cannot long remain on good terms with one another. Nevertheless, back then the commons were reminded by both *popolani* and nobles, as well as by some good religious men, that it was not prudent to want a final victory over the nobles. New reforms were passed thanks to the efforts of those conciliators, including the wisest among the commons³¹. Undoubtedly, Machiavelli casts his blame on the nobility. Yet, he does not absolve the people. Even though Machiavelli tends to consider the nobility's arrogance to be more dangerous than the people's license, Viroli has a point in arguing that both of them may become «lethal toxins that poison republican liberty»³².

Machiavelli addressed questions whose philosophical significance can hardly be denied: the eternity of the world; the contingency of human agency; free will; the gap between appearance and reality; the rise and fall of political communities; the use of knowledge derived from the combination of the experience of current affairs and the lesson of the past. The nature of these ques-

³⁰ ID., *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* I, 4, 1; I, 5 (seguiti dalle *Considerazioni intorno ai Discorsi del Machiavelli* di F. Guicciardini), a cura di C. Vivanti, Einaudi, Torino 2000, pp. 17-20.

³¹ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Istorie fiorentine*, II, 12-14, in *Tutte le opere*, cit., pp. 1754-1759.

³² M. VIROLI, *Neither Medicean nor Populist*, cit., p. 155.

tions suggests that he possessed a philosophical sensibility, not merely that he paid some attention to the philosophical questions *à la page* in his own environment³³. Whether this sensibility was enough to grant him the status of philosopher in the eyes of his contemporaries is a matter of dispute. Only conjectures can be made on this topic. According to Leo Strauss, he belonged to the political philosophy tradition, even though he was moved by the desire to uproot it³⁴. Harvey Mansfield agrees that Machiavelli inherited and revolted against the tradition of political philosophy. By so doing, he sustained, and contributed to, it. Judgmental as he was, when he came to conclusions, he did so seeking to persuade others, but also «in defiance of all doctrine and opinion hitherto»³⁵. Surely, Machiavelli liked to think about things that most people did not want to think about, and he did so in a radical way. He believed that it is good to reason about everything (*essendo bene ragionare d'ogni cosa*)³⁶.

One way of making sense of the *disiecta membra* of Machiavelli's philosophy of life is to put them in contrast to Dante Alighieri's. Machiavelli often referred to the latter in a passionate, and yet ambivalent, way. Dante's philosophy of life can be exemplified by Ulysses' dictum that men were not made to live like brutes, but to pursue virtue and knowledge (*Inf.* XXVI, v. 119-120) through a struggle that has theological significance. In the Machiavellian perspective, there is no room for theological considerations. The pursuing of the types of virtue and knowledge they men can afford is constantly filled with tension. There is no such a thing as total safety against the blows of Fortune. Human beings are in certain respects much more vulnerable than other animal beings and all of them are wretched creatures (*tristi*) doomed to live the life of creatures that, like Chiron the centaur, are half beasts and half men³⁷. In this sense, *virtù* is not only the range of personal traits that a prince will find it necessary to acquire in order to maintain the State and to achieve great things. Acquiring the ability of varying one's conduct from good to evil and back again as circumstances dictate is the almost impossible task that princes as well as people in general are expected to take upon themselves, whether they like it or not. Despite the fact that they try not deviate from right conduct, necessity forces them to enter upon the path of wrongdoing. The trouble is that the need of flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances, in-

³³ D. CANFORA, *La biblioteca di Machiavelli*, in E. CUTINELLI-RENDINA, R. RUGGIERO (a cura di), *Machiavelli*, cit., pp. 169-183, 182.

³⁴ It remains to be questioned that *Il Principe* continues «especially the Aristotelian tradition». See L. STRAUSS, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1958, pp. 23, 59.

³⁵ H.C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth. Creating the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, p. 76.

³⁶ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discorsi*, I, 18, 1, cit., p. 53.

³⁷ ID., *Il Principe*, XVIII, cit., pp. 115, 117.

cluding those in which wrongdoing takes priority, clashes against the inescapable constancy of character³⁸.

Machiavelli has doubts about whether it was plausible to expect that human beings were capable of generating such flexible disposition within themselves. On these grounds not only he implicitly recognizes the ultimate inadequacy of single-ruler regimes, but also he makes room for another meaning of the term *virtù*. In Machiavelli's perspective the possession of virtue is equated with a willingness to follow to the uttermost whatever course of action – whether conventionally virtuous or not – will in fact save the life and preserve the liberty of one's native land. When the safety of one's own 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 wholeheartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the freedom of one's country³⁹. The point is relevant.

Sasso highlighted the features of Machiavelli's anti-Dantism, which is, at the same time, linguistic, political, and philosophical⁴⁰. *Machiavelli vs. Dante* is a drama which turns around an irreconcilable conflict in which what is fundamentally at stake are not only ideas and ideals, but also important choices made in life. Machiavelli's criticism is to be found in the *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua*, compiled between 1523 and 1524. In the background stands the admiration for Dante as a man of letters. It remains difficult to establish whether the dichotomy between the positive judgment on Dante as a man of letters and the negative one that is both political and philosophical is an acquisition of Machiavelli's late age, or dates back to the years of his youth. Surely, his critique emerges *post res perditas*, in years full of bitterness, when pessimism prevailed. On the linguistic front, Dante claimed he did not write in Florentine but in Italian. He, says Machiavelli, is among the very dishonest people who dared calling the Florentine language Italian. On the political and ethical front, Machiavelli's anti-Dantism reflects a way of understanding the *optimus civis* that radically differs from Dante's. Machiavelli portrays himself as an alternative (political) model to Dante⁴¹.

Machiavelli tries to build up the myth of his own exemplary civic attitude. Dante - *civis florentinus natione, non moribus* – was the term of a comparison whose goal was destroying one myth (Dante) to provide another myth (Machiavelli). Machiavelli attacks violently Dante the refugee who had not forgiven Florence for the exile it had inflicted upon him. By contrast, he remained

³⁸ C.J. NEDERMAN, *Machiavelli*, Oneworld, Oxford 2009, pp. 50-62.

³⁹ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discorsi*, III, 41, 1, cit., p. 323.

⁴⁰ G. SASSO, *Su Machiavelli*, cit., pp. 205-222.

⁴¹ G. SASSO, *Postilla a Su un passo del «Discorso o dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua»*, in ID., *Machiavelli e gli antichi. E altri saggi*, Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, Milano-Napoli 1988, vol. 3, pp. 165-172, 170.

faithful to Florence, even in misfortune, because the duty of the virtuous citizen is to love its *patria*, right or wrong. Political anti-Dantism manifests itself in the form of hostility towards the use Dante made of language that Machiavelli did not tolerate, that is, the language that denigrates Florence. Florentines, Dante makes Brunetto Latini say, are «ungrateful, malignant people». Florentines – the «beasts of Fiesole» who have the reputation of being «one-eyed» – are «stingy, envious and proud»; they «still live like mountain people» (*Inf.* XV 61-73).

Machiavelli condemns Dante for the hatred and the feeling of revenge that he nurtured towards the city that had also raised him and made him what he had become. Dante is a failed patriot, an ungrateful and despicable traitor. The latter indulged in an immoderate and unjustly denigrating criticism of the laws, customs and most representative men of Florence, which, if on the one hand it seriously injured him, making him *exul immeritus*, on the other hand it made him famous. Machiavelli asserts that he has always honored Florence, even while having to cope with difficulties and dangers. A man has no greater obligation in his life than that towards his *patria* upon which his own life depends, as well as everything that fortune and nature have granted to him. He who with his soul and his works makes himself an enemy of *patria* can deservedly be called a parricide, even if he was offended by it. Denigrating one's own *patria* is the most nefarious thing, worse than beating up one's own father and mother. Honoring it, always and in any case, is the primary duty of the good citizen. We must therefore go against those who too presumptuously try to deprive Florence of her honor. Dante proved to be an excellent man in terms of intellect and doctrine, except where he had to talk about his own country. None of the punishments and calamities evoked against Florence have materialized. If anything, the city continued to prosper and grow in glory⁴².

Another way to have access to Machiavelli's philosophy of life is found in *L'Asino*, a poem in eight chapters written between 1517 and 1518, which remained unfinished. The poem was published in Florence in 1549 under the title *L'Asino d'oro* (*The Golden Ass*). It can be seen as a parody of Dante's *Commedia*. The theme of *metamorphosis* is central to it, echoing Apuleius, Ovid, Aesop, and Plutarch. The narrative voice is that of a man, who has been transformed into a donkey, who wants to tell of the misadventures, pains and torments he suffered when he was a man, now that he suffers much less from the bites and blows of Fortune. What we see at work is Machiavelli's sentiment of failure in the face of ingratitude, misrecognition and persecution. First, the narrating voice says he wants to tell the strange story of a young Florentine struck by a rare, apparently incurable, disease: he felt compelled to run, always and everywhere. His father was desperate. No physician was able

⁴² N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discorso o Dialogo intorno alla nostra lingua*, in *Tutte le opere*, cit., pp. 2362-2377.

to find a remedy which could work. His father put his faith even in a charlatan, who claimed to have a remedy and even managed, for a while, to have him finally quite. The cure didn't work. After a period of tranquility, the young man started running up and down again. Finally, he proudly proclaimed that not even Christ could stop him. So, he spent the rest of his life running. His father realized he had wasted a fortune and all the physicians' efforts were in vain. The point is made that the world is rotten and nothing works against habit and our own nature, given that our mind inevitably follows our nature.

The second canto begins with the bewilderment of the protagonist for finding himself in a very dark forest. In the darkness he thought he had seen Death with her sickle. All of the sudden a light emerged from darkness. A beautiful woman was approaching in a rather captivating way, showing her thick and blond hair, full of braids. She had a lantern in her right hand, to orient herself, and a horn in her left hand so that she could gather all the beasts (lions, wolves, bears, deer, badgers and above all wild boars) that she was supposed to take care of, preventing them from getting lost. He was terrified, but finally the woman approached him and greeted him with familiarity, calling him by name, he felt reassured. She asked how he ended up in that place. He answered that it was because of his lack of prudence, his illusions, and his futile and obnoxious beliefs. The woman tells she is a servant of the sorceress Circe who, due to her infamy, could not find other places to stay other than those dark woods, leaving behind any social life and laws. She rules over the beasts that inhabit that dark land. She tells him that the beasts are now staring at him, licking his feet, for they feel sorry for him. They used to be men. It was Circe who transformed them into beasts. He follows the weird fellowship, and they reach a palace. The light of the lantern went off. After she took the beasts to another place, she came back and took him to a room. She comforts him, telling him that hardly a man had suffered from the ingratitude for his efforts as he did. It was not his fault; just bad luck.

Nothing in life is unchangeable and that's the main cause of love and hatred, of war and peace. Motion and change are the very cause of his wasted efforts. A day will come in which all the suffering will be left behind, but for a while it is better to go on under new skin. Providence which governs the human race prescribes to undergo such a pain for his own sake. So, he will lose his human look to take that of the beast. That's an unchangeable law: the return to bestiality. In that place evil can only be postponed, not erased. Under her guidance, however, he will have to avoid despair. The fifth canto begins with a cry of the protagonist about being used to disadvantage more than to advantage. Never was Fortune friendly to him. The lady then offered him a meal, suggesting they could enjoy the rest of the night. The moment must be sought, and all evils must be taken in, as they come, as if they were a medicine. Foolish are the ones who enjoy suffering. He tries to restrain himself for

telling more about those moments of pleasure because truth declares war to those who say it. On the other hand, by not telling it, the pleasure experienced is not full pleasure, even if that means being blamed for telling about it. So, he tells about how stupidly hesitant he was. They enjoyed one another carnally. Finally he says he is happy to be there, in the dark forest. At dawn she left and he started thinking about the mutability of life circumstances. In canto five a political message is given: kingdoms and cities ruin because those who have power are never satisfied with the power they have. Those who lose power plot against those who have gained power. This appetite is the basis of the ruin of states and although everyone recognizes the mistake, no one avoids it. Too much power is harmful.

It's the Icarus complex; he who burns his own wings from wanting too much. Then comes another principle: good laws, good practices and virtue make countries stable and peaceful, but tranquility generates idleness, and idleness generates inactivity and ruin. Ruin will generate new virtue. So, nothing is stable under the sun – except this very cycle one would say – and good and evil implicate each other endlessly; one is the cause of the other. Some believe, mistakenly, that the cause of the ruin of states are economic practices and sexual practices, and the cause of their salvation is prayer and renunciation. But this is not the case really. Once the lady is back, and he is happy to see her, she invites to follow her to a place where he will meet again people he once met. In a dormitory he finds certain animals: lions (the ones who once were generous and kind men), indeed, few from Florence; bears (the ones who led a violent and ordinary life); wolves (never satisfied with the food they have); and so on. In Canto seven he is introduced to those who experience frustration: a cat that has allowed its prey to escape; a fox constantly on the look-out for traps; a dog barking at the moon; a lion in love that allowed himself to be deprived of his teeth and claws. In the eighth canto he finally meets a fat pig (*porcellotto grasso*) rolling in the mud. She wants to surprise him saying that the pig will never be willing to revert its condition; now is like a fish in a river or in a lake. In fact the pig answers that it's wrong to assume that he wants to go back to his human condition. The pig says that Self-love makes you consider that there is no other good than the human condition.

All troubles arise from the dishonest appetite, inherent in your nature, which prevents you from being satisfied with little. The strength of men is nothing compared to the strength of animals. While animals are moderate in sexual matters, men eagerly seek sexual pleasure. With little, animals are better friends of nature. Men, more endowed with virtue, are instead exposed to not being satisfied with what nature provides. Men, unlike animals, are vulnerable. Man's life is born with tears. Language and capability came with ambition and avarice. First nature, and then luck, bring infirmities into man's life. Ambition, greed, lust and tears make life, which everyone celebrates, like

an illness. The more fragile and precarious life is, the more one desires it. Only man kills, crucifies, despoils and disfigures. Compared to the life of a pig, that of men, who declare themselves happy, is miserable, so we must not believe those who claim to be happy. It's much better to live carelessly like a pig rolling in the mud.

Conclusion

My contention is that Machiavelli remained doubtful about which social group must be selected as the guardians of liberty, for it is impossible to tell which of the two dispositions they embody is more harmful in a republic. The horizon within which this doubt is located remains a republican regime. The questions of whether McCormick got Machiavelli right, and, above all, whether we are right in taking Machiavelli as a model for reviving our political systems, must be asked, however sympathetic we may be with regard to the concerns about democracy today that McCormick conveys. Machiavelli thought all men are wicked, and they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers. Men never do what is good unless necessity drives them to do so⁴³. In the background of these points stirs the admonition that we find at the heart of his poem *Di fortuna*: «there is nothing in the world that is eternal»⁴⁴.

According to Sasso, Machiavelli's philosophical outlook is tragic. Machiavelli saw politics not only as a necessity demanding disregard for morality, but also as a remedy yet unable to provide durable solutions to the most troubling problems of individual and collective life, especially social and political decay⁴⁵. Machiavelli is the thinker of *insecuritas*, and his is a philosophy of precariousness⁴⁶. Certainly, to say that Machiavelli had a tragic philosophy of life is not the same as saying that he had a coherent one. At the same time, on the grounds we cannot conclude that Machiavelli was a democrat and a populist.

⁴³ N. MACHIAVELLI, *Discorsi*, I, 3, cit., pp. 15-16.

⁴⁴ In the poem, presumably written in 1506, Machiavelli sees Fortune as *incostante dea e mobil diva* (34). He wrote: «per occulta virtù, che ci governa, si muta col suo corso il nostro stato. Non è nel mondo cosa alcuna eterna: Fortuna vuol così [...]» (pp. 119-122). See N. MACHIAVELLI, *I Capitoli*, in *Tutte le opere*, cit., pp. 2469-2475, 2470, 2472.

⁴⁵ G. SASSO, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Il pensiero politico*, il Mulino, Bologna 1993, vol. 1, pp. 455-477.

⁴⁶ G. SASSO, A. GNOLI, *I corrotti e gli inetti. Conversazioni su Machiavelli*, Bompiani, Milano 2013, pp. 25, 128, 131-132; G. FERRONI, *Machiavelli, o dell'incertezza. La politica come arte del rimedio*, Donzelli, Roma 2003, pp. 113-131; G. INGLESE, *Per Machiavelli. L'arte dello Stato, la cognizione delle storie*, Carocci, Roma 2006, pp. 93-149.