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The Place of the Tyrant in Machiavelli's
Political Thought and the Literary Genre
of the *Prince*

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**The Place of the Tyrant in Machiavelli's Political Thought
and the Literary Genre of the Prince**

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Introduction

My project at the Italian Academy concerns how to create good citizens in a multicultural society through a reform of education. In my previous paper I tried to show how an Aristotelian approach seems to be the most promising model of education. The typical objection to such an approach is that it “idealizes” too much the real situation of human beings and their ‘nature,’ which has a lot of negative features neglected by the neo-Aristotelians. In this paper I aim to show how Machiavelli’s political writings aim at permanently educate the real statesman, teaching him the primary duty of responsibility and the virtue of prudence. Machiavelli, the champion of political realism, becomes thus an ally of Aristotle in educating good citizens.

One of Machiavelli’s early readers, the French author Innocent Gentillet, commented that Machiavelli devised “des Maximes tous meschantes, et basty sur icelles non une science *politique* mais *tyrannique*.” Interestingly enough, he wrote this sentence in a treatise on how to rule a regime properly and peacefully, i.e. ‘politically’, a book known as the *Anti-Machiavel*.¹ Even more interesting to me is the fact that this comment repeats the classical opposition between “politics” and “tyranny” that appeared in Greek politics in the VIth century BCE, when the Pisistratid tyrants were chased from the city and a democratic government was created, an opposition then bequeathed to the long tradition of Western political thought. The great event of 508 BCE marks the birth both of democracy and of the ideological figure of the tyrant, who bore only a pale resemblance to the actual tyrants who ruled Greek cities. The tyrant then became the city’s public enemy and tyranny was viewed as the obverse of democracy and politics itself.² The vision of equal participation to political rule under the law was contrasted with the arbitrary and sole rulership of the tyrant, in a movement that goes from chaos to order –from the whimsical unpredictability of the tyrant’s conduct to the regularity of the fixed law.³ This ideological figure of the

¹ “[Machiavelli] devised a number of absolutely evil recommendations, and built upon those not a *political* but a *tyrannical* science.” Innocent Gentillet, *Anti-Machiavel (Discours sur les moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix un royaume ou autre principauté...)* (1576), ed. A. d’Andrea and P.D. Stewart (Florence: Casalini, 1974) 20, emphasis mine.

² On the development of the tyrant’s ‘ideological figure’ see Giovanni Giorgini, *La città e il tiranno. Il concetto di tirannide nella Grecia del VII-IV secolo* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1993.) On the Athenian politico-cultural *Stimmung* in the Vth century BCE one may refer to J.F. McGlew, *Tyranny and Political Culture in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) and M. Vegetti et al., *L’ideologia della città* (Naples: Liguori, 1977.)

³ Tyranny and law seem to be opposed right from ancient times; noticeably, law-givers and jurists never tried to ‘rationalize’ this form of government, i.e. to set it into a juridical frame, and tyranny always retained this

tyrant was described by Greek authors in his psychological profile as well as in his moral, legal and economic features and, being the counterpart of the prevailing view of politics, survived the disappearance of ancient tyrannies and resurfaced in different epochs with some constant traits and some features peculiar to the historical circumstances. The original tyranny disappeared, but the ‘icon of evil’ remained.

When Machiavelli put in writing his thoughts on government, he was the heir of this long-established tradition of reflection on tyranny, a tradition that spanned from Solon to contemporary Florentine civic humanists, passing through Roman republican authors, Roman law and medieval juridical classifications. Machiavelli’s great novelty was to see ‘politics’ (or republican, popular government) and tyranny not as two totally opposed regimes but rather as belonging to a *continuum* of forms of government where the best option depended on the political circumstances. To be sure, Machiavelli does not obliterate the difference between tyranny and kingdom or principality (this will be Hobbes’ contribution); but he sees tyranny as a reformable regime, capable of being turned into a principality through the education of the ruler. The focus of both of Machiavelli’s most important political works, the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, is on the permanent education of the real statesman; for this reason, they both belong to the literary genre of Aristotle’s *Politics* and Cicero’s *De Inventione*, because they aim at creating a prudent statesman who knows the authentic goal of politics but, at the same time, is able to recognize “the quality of times” and face the “accidents” of political life. Machiavelli’s lasting contribution to this classical tradition rests in his dramatic emphasis on the “seriousness of politics”, that may force a statesman to “damn his own soul” in order to save the State (and his fellow-citizens.) This is also the permanent lesson he has to teach to contemporary readers, namely how to be a good citizen and a wise statesman so as to be able to counsel well one’s own State and even be able to save it in times of trouble. Machiavelli’s importance for the contemporary reader does not lie so much in the republican values he can infuse into liberal theory and in its allegedly narrow vision of liberty; rather, it lies in his emphasis on the all-importance of political education for the citizens of a healthy political community.

feature of transiency and exceptionality. Medieval political thought, too, seems to be more interested in the question *who* the tyrant is rather than *what* is tyranny.

Machiavelli's phenomenology of tyranny

Contrary to our intuitive belief, an investigation of Machiavelli's notion of tyranny is an engaging task, for this notion appears to be elusive and somewhat blurry, as compared to the Florentine secretary's usual ability to give us astoundingly clear-cut definitions.⁴ This does not mean that Machiavelli's ideas were confused on this topic, but simply that he used this concept in two different ways, descriptively and prescriptively, just like the classic Greek authors. In his work, the word "tyranny" identifies, on the one hand, a form of monarchical regime and has therefore a neutral meaning; on the other hand, it can have a clearly negative *pathos* and connotation, which neatly mark its difference from "principality" and other words used by Machiavelli to describe a one-person government. In this dual usage Machiavelli, the discoverer of "new modes and orders", appears to be the heir of classical Greek political thought, which always showed a remarkable ambivalence towards tyranny. An investigation of the notion of tyranny in his work thus requires attention to the detail without losing sight of the general picture.

This statement seems, however, to be immediately refuted by the very beginning sentences of Machiavelli's two major theoretical works. At the beginning of the *Prince*, where Machiavelli seems to adopt a clear and rigorous categorization of the forms of government, he writes:

All the states, all the dominions that have held or now hold power over men, have been and now are either *republics* or *principalities*. [...] The dominions gained in this way are either accustomed to living *under a prince*, or used to *being free*.⁵

Machiavelli seems to reduce the elaborate classical theory of political regimes –developed in the age of Herodotus, refined by Plato, Aristotle and Polibius, and then passed on to Roman and medieval political thought- to a clear-cut opposition between two regimes, republic and principality, and to two corresponding ways of living, either "free" or "under a prince" (a condition that evidently involves some restriction to freedom and some form of

⁴ This elusiveness leads Mario Turchetti, *Tyrannie et tyrannicide de l'Antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: PUF, 2001), to say that Machiavelli does not try to define tyranny, he simply describes it (351) and also to comment "la tyrannie [...] demeure une tendance" (352).

⁵ *Prince* 1, emphasis mine. The Italian text I use is *Il Principe e Discorsi*, ed. S. Bertelli, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1981. For the English translation I used as a reference *Machiavelli. The Chief Works and Others*, transl. A. Gibbard (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 3 Vols., 1989); also *The Discourses of N. Machiavelli*, ed. L.J. Walker (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1950), making occasional changes. A similar contrast between principality and republic, and between servitude and free life, informs Machiavelli's account in *Prince* 5 and in *Discourses* II, 2.

servitude.)⁶ If we compare this famous beginning with the equally quick categorization of chapter 9, dedicated to “civil principality”, we find three mutually exclusive conditions that are possible in political regimes, namely “either principality, or liberty or licence”,⁷ where the last alternative equals to anarchy and therefore to lack of political form. More accurately, “licence” identifies the situation existing in a bad regime, usually a popular government,⁸ where there is unseetable strife between the noble and the people: here the citizens think only of their private, selfish interest, instead of the common good, thus paving the way to a possible tyranny.

Finally, in *Discourses* I, 2, where he follows closely the Polibian vision of the origins of political society and forms of government, Machiavelli states clearly that tyranny results from the decaying of principality. More specifically, when in ancient times principality ceased to be elective and became hereditary, princes began to compete with each other for luxuries and surrendered to all sorts of vices, thus becoming hateful to the people, but above all to the aristocrats. Being aware of their subjects’ hate, and fearing conspiracies on the part of the aristocrats, the princes started to offend the subjects, and this perverse interaction between the prince and “the universal” quickly turned principality into tyranny.⁹ In the general scheme of Machiavelli’s thought, however, this appears to be an isolated, classical reminiscence, which remains theoretically undeveloped.

The apparent, unequivocal clarity of these quotes might induce us to think that tyranny is a species of the kind “principality”, just like kingdom and despotism, although a degenerate species. We could therefore expect to find the classic contrast between “good king” and “bad tyrant”, elaborated by IVth century Greek political thought; or the similarly classic medieval description of tyranny as *perversio ordinis*, brought about either by an arbitrary and violent exercise of power (*ab exercitio*) or by lack of entitlement to rule (*ex defectu tituli*). However, as soon as we delve into Machiavelli’s works, we see that the name “tyrant” is used to describe diverse and unexpected figures, not all of whom would seem to fit into the usual portrait of the tyrant according to classical and medieval authors. On the

⁶ On the evolution of the theory of political regimes see Nicola Matteucci, “Governo, Forme di” in *Enciclopedia delle Scienze Sociali* (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1994), 4: 414-424, who observes that Machiavelli does not elaborate his conceptualization of tyranny.

⁷ *Prince* 9.

⁸ Cf. *Discourses* I, 2 where, following closely Polibius’ account, Machiavelli says that “Popular [government] is without difficulty converted into licence” and then, “in order to avoid such licence, principality is once again restored.”

⁹ *Discourses* I, 2. On the interpretation of this chapter, and on Machiavelli’s critical revival of Polibius, I agree with the fine analysis of Gennaro Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 1: 481-486.

other hand, the term is not applied in some cases which would seem to demand it. This is the case with some tyrants of the classical tradition and with some figures bearing obviously 'tyrannical' traits: Hiero is described as "the prince of Syracuse,"¹⁰ while Agatocles is even called both "prince" and "king";¹¹ Oliverotto from Fermo, incestuous murderer of relatives, receives the title of "prince."¹² At first sight, then, neither cruelty nor lack of legitimacy (not to mention moral baseness) seem to be sufficient reasons to be called a "tyrant" by Machiavelli. And yet, we find he uses the word in a derogatory sense for some statesmen, such as Caesar and the Roman Church as a whole. We cannot but conclude that in Machiavelli we find a complex phenomenology of monarchic government, which goes far beyond the simple contrast republic/principality or principality/tyranny, and the distinctive features of each form of monarchic government can be revealed only by a careful hermeneutical exercise.

One last preliminary observation, concerning the intended readers of Machiavelli's two major theoretical works is here in place. In the *Prince* Machiavelli never uses the word tyrant, although he depicts many characters as substantially tyrannical and, at times, he calls them tyrants in the account of their deeds in the *Discourses* or in other works. Notwithstanding its iconoclastic content, the *Prince*, dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, has a rhetorical form that traces back to the tradition of the *specula principis*. In it Machiavelli recurs to the rhetorical devices of this literary genre and, moreover, adopts a prudent writing style, suited to the people there addressed. This does not mean, of course, that Machiavelli obliterates the distinction between principality, kingdom and tyranny in the *Prince*, but shows us his attentiveness for writing and literary genre: one should better not use such words as "tyranny" in a work dedicated to a prince...¹³

In order to make our investigation easier, let us state right from the start that Machiavelli accepts the classical vision according to which despotism differs from tyranny in that it is a typically oriental occurrence and, as such, foreign to European political culture (and practice.) This is a form of government characterized by the rule of a lord who keeps all subjects alike in a condition of servitude.¹⁴ To quote the very effective account of the

¹⁰ *Prince* 6: "Hiero Siracusan [...] from private condition became prince of Siracusa."

¹¹ *Prince* 8; cf. *Discourses* II, 13.

¹² *Prince* 8.

¹³ I owe the observation that Machiavelli never uses the word "tyrant" in the *Prince* to Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 26: "the term 'tyrant' never occurs in the *Prince*; 'tyrant' is too harsh a word to use within the hearing of the prince."

¹⁴ *Prince* 4.

Prince, there are two different ways to govern a principality: “either with one prince, and all the others servants [...]; or with one Prince and many barons;” “the Turk” and the French king, respectively, are their modern instances.¹⁵ We find another interesting characterization of despotism in *Discourses* II, 2, where Machiavelli speaks of the oriental princes and calls them “barbarians” and “destroyers of countries and dissipators of all that man has done for civilization.”¹⁶ According to a classical stereotype, originating in the Vth century BCE and present in Herodotus and in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, which then became canonical with Aristotle, the servility typical of despotism prevents the Asians from excelling in virtue and from accomplishing any great deed. It is for this political reason, which is devoid of moralistic judgment, that Machiavelli shows himself uninterested in the despotic form of government.

The lesson of classical political thought on the subject of monarchical regimes has an undeniably strong influence on other aspects of Machiavelli’s thought. Greek political thought attributed the instauration of tyrannies in the cities to *stasis*, to factional strife within the civic body; such strife was therefore considered a deadly disease for the political community. Roman and medieval political authors also warned against factional strife and civil war for their ability to generate tyranny. Machiavelli takes up this classic conclusion on the dangers of factional strife but introduces a fundamental innovation, well aware of its novelty. For he sees in social conflict (or “tumults”) the core ingredient of Rome’s greatness and liberty. He is persuaded that the conflict between patricians and plebeians, correctly institutionalized by the good Roman laws, contributed to the well-being of the entire city; by allowing the Plebs and the Noble alike to “release their humors,” the good laws and institutions of Rome kept the city free and enabled her to become great and powerful.¹⁷ When, on the other hand, there are no good laws or institutions, social conflict is like a deadly disease for the political community, because it leads to the pursuit of selfish ends, the loss of liberty and, eventually, tyranny:

In the incidents here related it should, therefore, be noticed first of all that the inconvenience involved in the establishment of this tyranny was due to the same causes as are most that are set up in cities, namely to the excessive demand of the people for freedom and to the excessive demand to dominate on the part of the nobles. For, when they fail to agree in making a *law*

¹⁵ *Prince* 19; *Discourses* III, 1.

¹⁶ *Discourses* II, 2.

¹⁷ See especially *Discourses* I, 4.

conducive to *liberty*, and, instead, one or other of the parties uses its weight to support *one* particular person, *tyranny* at once arises.¹⁸

What is manifest here is the contrast between the liberty guaranteed to everybody by the law, and the arbitrary power of one person under a tyrant. Machiavelli's notion of tyranny is part and parcel of his complex, essentially naturalistic,¹⁹ conception of the inner dynamics of political regimes. Machiavelli is persuaded that in all political communities the "humors" of the people and of the nobles must conflict: the ambition of the nobles is to dominate; the people, on the other hand, just want to be free.²⁰ Where these "humors" are channelled by good laws and institutions, together with good customs and good luck, the State flourishes;²¹ otherwise, social conflict paves the way to tyranny, which is therefore the negative outcome of factional strife. In this situations, what often happens is that a citizen comes to such great fame that he aspires to go beyond republican equality. With presents and munificence, or by winning the favour of his soldiers, he creates a following for himself, blinds the people with "some kind of false good" and becomes the tyrant of the city.²²

Following literally an Herodotean suggestion, Machiavelli considers freedom conducive to power, indeed, the basic ingredient of success and flourishing for a political community. Only free peoples can accomplish "great deeds"; free peoples flourish because they do not pursue their private interest but the common good. Again, echoing Sallust, he maintains that it is only the common good that makes cities great and "this is pursued only in republics."²³ The political arena is for Machiavelli the stage where "great deeds" are accomplished and the tyrant –as Aristotle had already maintained by describing tyranny as the "farthest removed from a form of government," because it is against men's natural and political ends- prevents citizens from accomplishing anything great.²⁴ These classical suggestions, together with contemporary republican arguments, led Machiavelli to espouse

¹⁸ *Discourses* I, 40, emphasis mine.

¹⁹ *Discourses* I, 6. Similar statements in *Discourses* II, *Proem*, III, 1; *Florentine Histories* V, 1.

²⁰ *Prince* 9; *Discourses* I, 5.

²¹ *Discourses* I, 48.

²² *Discourses* III, 28. See also Machiavelli's reservations towards the extremely human behaviour displayed by Valerius Corvinus toward his soldiers: this behaviour is "advantageous in the case of a prince but harmful in the case of a private citizen," because it "prepares the way for tyranny:" *Discourses* III, 22. I cannot agree, therefore, with Gennaro Sasso, who thinks that the tyrant in Machiavelli is identified by a double enmity, towards the people as well as towards the magistrates and the noble. As a consequence, the tyrant's power lacks a specific social support and is necessarily weak. See Gennaro Sasso, "Principato civile e tirannide" in *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi* (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1988), 2: 386.

²³ *Discourses* II, 2. Cf. I, 1. For the classical examples see Herodotus V, 66; V, 78; V, 91; Sallust VII, 3.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* V 11, 1313a34-1314a25.

the superiority of republican “vivere libero” as compared to tyranny: even if a “virtuous tyrant” arose in a community, he comments, there would follow no advantage to the people because every increase in the State would be to the advantage of the tyrant, who cannot even recognize the merit of valuable citizens. Using arguments that seem drawn from Aristotle’s *Politics* or from Xenophon’s *Hiero* (as well as Plato’s *Republic*), Machiavelli concludes his portrait of the tyrant by saying that the tyrant cannot bestow honours on good citizens, is surrounded by flatterers, lives in continuous suspicion and turns “what is public” into a private possession.²⁵ We are at this point puzzled. What is the difference, we may ask, between the person who takes advantage of factional strife in order to become a tyrant and the “prudent man” who assumes power in order to become prince and restore order in a corrupt city?

Machiavelli’s concept of tyranny

Let us now face the difficult problem of identifying Machiavelli’s concept of tyranny from a dual perspective, the one vaguely deductive, the other more specifically inductive. Let us consider, on the one hand, in what Machiavelli’s vision of good government and of the best regime consists, in order to see if this enables us to identify *per contrarium* his concept of tyranny; let us examine, on the other hand, some instances of people described as “tyrants” by Machiavelli, in order to elicit the features that make them tyrants.

What is, then, the positive counterpart of tyranny in Machiavelli, what is his notion of good government? This is a mixed government, where laws and institutions prompt citizens to display the greatest “virtue” in inner politics. The “vivere libero” is characterized by the participation of all citizens in the formation of the law that regulates the political community: liberty is equated with self-government. This is obviously an ideal, one that can nonetheless be approximated in reality by aiming at the participation of most or an increasing number of citizens in the formation of law. Machiavelli is a realist and his observation of the ways of the world taught him that only a small segment of the people “desires to be free in order to rule, while all the others, who are countless, desire freedom

²⁵ *Discourses* II, 2. For this reason in *Prince* 23 Machiavelli recommends that the prince avoid flatterers and resort instead to a few faithful men for counselling, men who may tell him the truth on any question. For the classical examples see Xenophon, *Hiero* II, 10-11; V, 1; VII, 8. Plato, *Republic* book IX. Aristotle, *Politics* V 10, 1310a40-1311a27.

to live in security.”²⁶ In any case, “vivere civile” and “vivere libero” are possible only in a community based on the rule of law and aimed at the common good. Following in the republican tradition, this kind of community is called “republic” and identified with a regime generally speaking different from monarchy.²⁷ Furthermore, like Cicero and classical republican authors, Machiavelli sees “vivere civile” as based on equality before the laws (*aequum ius*) and on equal access to magistracies according to virtue (*aequa libertas*).²⁸ An essential feature of civil and political life is for him the *rule of law*, centered on the generality and impartiality of the law. As it is well shown by Horatius’ example in *Discourses* I, 24, in a well-ordered government laws apply equally to everyone, without considerations of social status; prizes and punishments are determined by the laws, which embody the deliberation of the political community, and not by the whimsical will of one person.

Tyranny is the complete obverse of all this: it is the denial of liberty and the rule of law. Machiavelli explicitly contrasts “civil and free living” with “absolute and tyrannical living.”²⁹ More specifically, the danger lies in the situation when someone “assumes extraordinary authority and introduces laws disruptive of civic equality.”³⁰ This easily leads to a condition that is the opposite of the “vivere libero” regulated by laws, where the tyrant’s whim is itself the law.³¹ Tyranny is based on armed violence –which is the contrary to “civil modes and customs”- and on the necessity to introduce all sorts of innovations in the State in order to subdue the old powers and shatter ancient loyalties. “Such methods,” Machiavelli notes, “are exceedingly cruel and are repugnant to any community, not only to a Christian one, but to any composed of men. It behoves, therefore, every man to shun them, and to prefer rather to live as a private citizen than as a king with such ruination of men to his score.”³² Tyranny originates from corruption, from sedition and disorder and is

²⁶ *Discourses* I, 16. Although the idea that the many are not so much annoyed at being excluded from holding office, because they are glad to mind their own affairs, comes from Aristotle, *Politics* V 8, 1308b34-37. This passage, extremely realistic in identifying in few citizens those who really desire freedom in order to participate in political power, makes more complex the republican image of Machiavelli depicted, for instance, by Quentin Skinner. See Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.)

²⁷ For an excellent summary see Quentin Skinner, “The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty” in *Liberty before Liberalism*.

²⁸ Cicero, *De Officiis* I, 34, 124; Livy II, 3. For this ‘republican’ characterization of Machiavelli see Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.)

²⁹ *Discourses* I, 9. See also *Discourses* III, 3, and III, 7, on the “changes from freedom to tyranny or the other way about.”

³⁰ *Discourses* III, 3.

³¹ *Discourses* I, 25-26. Cf. *Florentine Histories* VIII, 1 where “vivere civile” is contrasted with “sole authority.”

³² *Discourses* I, 26.

nourished by them, being therefore the perfect obverse to “vivere politico;³³ this, in turn, is identified by “the possibility of enjoying what one has, freely and without incurring suspicion for instance, the assurance that one’s wife and children will be respected, the absence of fear for oneself.”³⁴ The contrast could not be more hard and fast. Liberty essentially consists in living safely in a condition of equality;³⁵ tyranny, on the contrary, stems from inequality that leads to factional strife unregulated by the laws.³⁶ Political art consists in unifying, or keeping together, a State and in giving common laws to it; the tyrant keeps “the state disjoined” and only thinks of his own private interest.³⁷

Now, let us examine some instances of tyrants described by Machiavelli, recalling that he never uses the word in the *Prince*. As we have previously noted, we find in his work a neutral usage of the word “tyrant”, where it means simply “monarch”: the Spartan Nabis, for instance, is interchangeably called “prince” (*Prince* 9) and “tyrant” (*Discourses* I, 40 and III, 6.)³⁸ This “weak” use is less interesting for our purposes. It is to the pregnant use of the word that we must look for theoretical clarification. The presence of the Athenian tyrant Pisistratus among his examples of tyrants should not surprise us; what is interesting, however, is the reason. Pisistratus took away the freedom in which Athens had previously lived thanks to Solon’s reforms, and this is why Machiavelli brands him a “tyrant.”³⁹ The situation of Clearcus is identical. He became ruler of Eraclea by taking advantage of factional strife, and then stripped the people of its freedom.⁴⁰ A similar case is that of Tarquin “the Proud.” He acquired “extraordinary” power and ruled like a tyrant from his palace, keeping public debate out of politics and relegating it to a private *affaire*, trampling on the laws and on the senate’s power. Caesar was Rome’s first tyrant because he acquired an “extraordinary authority” that destroyed the republican freedom. Caesar is guilty of putting himself beyond the law, just like the decemvirs, who are also labelled as tyrants for “occupying Rome’s liberty.”⁴¹ We may infer that ruling against the ancient laws, modes and customs, thus destroying the liberty of the citizens, transforms the prince into a tyrant and

³³ *Discourses* III, 8.

³⁴ *Discourses* I, 16. The whole chapter focusses on the difference between “tyrannical state” and “vivere libero.”

³⁵ *Discourses* I, 16; I, 17.

³⁶ *Discourses* I, 40; III, 28.

³⁷ *Discourses* II, 2.

³⁸ See also the cases of Annon of Carthago and of Pandolfo Petrucci of Siena in *Discourses* III, 6, where “prince” and “tyrant” are used indifferently. Pandolfo Petrucci is described as “prince of Siena” in *Prince* 20.

³⁹ *Discourses* I, 28. Cf. II, 2; III, 6.

⁴⁰ *Discourses* I, 16.

⁴¹ *Discourses* I, 35; I, 40; I, 41.

endangers the State itself. This is the outright political guilt of the tyrants, not the fact that they obtained their power in an “extraordinary and hateful way.”⁴²

There is one passage in which Machiavelli’s republican *patbos* prompts him to say that changes in political regimes happen only “from republic into tyranny or from tyranny into republic” and there is no mention of principality nor of any other regime.⁴³ We may recall that in Machiavelli’s works the “*istraordinari*” are means outside the law, linked to an exceptional situation and lethal to republican equality.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Machiavelli praises the Roman institution of dictatorship because, though it is an exceptional form of power, it is regulated by the laws.⁴⁵ Similarly, Oliverotto from Fermo is not called a tyrant because he killed his uncle in order to reach the throne, but because he turned a city whose citizens used to live free into a principality, and, in the end, was not even able to keep his power.⁴⁶ Machiavelli comments that the people of Fermo who helped him gain his power “cherished servitude more than the freedom of their country.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, Romulus, who kills his brother Remus in the very act of founding Rome, is not called a tyrant. Machiavelli comments that “it is convenient to conclude that, although the fact is against him, the effect justifies him.”⁴⁸ For Romulus acted to defend the “common good” and not “out of his own ambition.” After founding Rome, he did not set up an ephemeral personal rulership but kept for himself only the kind of authority typical of a good king, leading the army and convoking the Senate, and thus started “*uno vivere civile e libero.*”

In the case of Giovampagolo Baglioni of Perugia, Machiavelli’s negative judgment is motivated by Giovampagolo’s incapacity to be completely evil, with the consequence that he lost his power. Giovampagolo, who had killed cousins and nephews in order to grab the power, and who had an incestuous relationship with his sister, did not dare oppose Pope Giulio II because of his cowardice.⁴⁹ In his case, moral sordidness becomes political ineffectiveness, and this prompts Machiavelli’s reproach.

⁴² *Discourses* III, 5.

⁴³ *Discourses* III, 3, where we also find a contrast between tyranny and “free state.”

⁴⁴ I am persuaded that the “*istraordinari*” refer to the political and legal realm, and not to the sphere of morality, as Quentin Skinner seems to believe: see his “The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Q. Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 193-221, cf. 205 n. 25.

⁴⁵ *Discourses* I, 34; cf. I, 29; I, 34. On Caesar as the first tyrant of Rome see *Discourses* I, 37.

⁴⁶ Similar also is the case of Francesco Valori in Florence: he lives like a prince in the city and is presumed to be able to set up his personal rule, going beyond the “*vivere civile.*” In order to contrast him the Florentines had to recur to “extraordinary ways.”

⁴⁷ *Prince* 8.

⁴⁸ *Discourses* I, 9.

⁴⁹ *Discourses* I, 27.

This is exemplified on a bigger scale by Machiavelli's treatment of the Roman Church, which also shows his bold, independent capacity of judgment. The "nepharious examples" of the Church led Italy to lose "all devotion and all religion; which causes innumerable inconveniences and innumerable disorders" because, as Machiavelli has previously shown, where there is no religion only fear of the prince can save the State.⁵⁰ But the Church is even more the cause of our ruin for a political reason: it kept, and continues to keep, Italy divided, thus preventing the Italians from enjoying the advantages of the "vivere civile": "Now of a truth no country has ever been united and happy unless the whole of it has been under the jurisdiction of one republic or one prince, as has happened to France and Spain" –Machiavelli concludes.⁵¹ It is for such political reasons that Machiavelli goes on to say that the Roman Church is the tyrant of Italy.

Another case is that of Gualtieri of Brienne, the Duke of Athens. Machiavelli describes his pompous manner, the continuous presence of armed cronies at his side, his violence against women and his arbitrariness towards other citizens, against all laws. Under his "tyrannical modes"

the citizens lived full of indignation, seeing the majesty of the State ruined, the orders corrupted, the laws cancelled, all honourable living rotten, all civil modesty destroyed.⁵²

Tyranny determines not only the end of genuine political life (the Duke had "bound the hands and gagged the mouth" of the city, Machiavelli observes), but also the corruption of morality. No moral life is possible where there are no good institutions and laws valid for everyone, briefly where there is not the "majesty of the State."

We can now more clearly understand why Machiavelli does not use the term "tyrant" nor passes a negative judgment on some classical tyrants or on some morally debatable people –namely, for their *political* merits in founding or keeping in existence a political community. Such merits are obviously judged according to Machiavelli's standards of good political life and statemanship, which include the ability of unifying, or keeping together, the State, getting rid of factions and contrasting external enemies, relying only on civic, non mercenary, army; all this together with the desire to do "great things", to aggrandize the State and acquire personal glory. Hiero of Syracuse is an example of a good prince because he had virtue also in private matters and took the necessary actions to keep

⁵⁰ *Discourses* I, 11.

⁵¹ *Discourses* I, 12.

⁵² *Florentine Histories* II, 36.

his power once he got it, including not relying on mercenary army.⁵³ Similarly, Agatocles of Syracuse is praised because he acquired his power thanks to his own merits and without relying on fortune, and kept the city free from inner conflicts, ruling it “without any civil controversy.” He was able to use well cruelty, although so conspicuously as to lead Machiavelli to comment that his qualities enabled him to “acquire power but not glory.”⁵⁴ The same applies to Cesare Borgia, who found Romagna in disunion and full of thefts and problems and wanted to give it a good government in order to render it “peaceful and obedient to the kingly arm.”⁵⁵ Moreover, Machiavelli’s famous statement that “Cesare Borgia was considered a cruel person; however, his cruelty had mended Romagna, put it together, reduced it to a peaceful and faithful condition” sheds light on what are for him the goods a real statesman should pursue: unity of the State, peace and faith, where the last word refers to faithfulness to the ruler, the recognition of his authority.⁵⁶ Rulers who attain these goods are not “tyrants,” even if they are cruel and immoral.

We may conclude that the main reason for Machiavelli’s condemnation of tyranny is of *political*, rather than moral or legal, nature.⁵⁷ In this respect, he fits into the so-called “republican tradition,”⁵⁸ where we find a pedagogico-political use of the tyrant’s figure. Conversely, he appears to be distant from medieval accounts that found the typical features of tyranny either in a cruel exercise of power or in lack of legitimacy, on the basis of rigorously legal considerations.⁵⁹ Neither cruelty nor illegitimacy is necessary, or sufficient,

⁵³ *Prince* 6; and 13.

⁵⁴ *Prince* 8.

⁵⁵ *Prince* 6.

⁵⁶ *Prince* 17; cf. 7, where it is said that Romagna was reduced into a “peaceful and unified condition.” That unity, peace and obedience inside the State were the goods that legitimized the ruthless action of the new prince was already perceived by Alessandro Passerin d’Entrèves, *The Notion of the State* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967.)

⁵⁷ This was already noticed by Raymond Aron in an essay written in 1940 but published in 1993: “La vraie condamnation de la ‘tyrannie’ est politique”, he says in his *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1993) 76. Observing the political nature of the condemnation of tyranny, he adds that “tous les crimes du tyran sont méprisables, parce que avant tout ils sont vains.”

⁵⁸ It is a popular belief among XVth century Florentine republican authors that “vivere politico e civile” is the opposite of tyranny because the tyrant is above the law and his rule violates the basic needs of political life. To quote just a few examples: Coluccio Salutati, *De Tyranno* I, 6; Giovanni Cavalcanti, *Istorie fiorentine*, II, 1; Girolamo Savonarola, *Trattato circa il reggimento e il governo della città di Firenze*, Alamanno Rinuccini, *Dialogus de libertate*.

⁵⁹ See Diego Quaglioni, “Tirannide e democrazia. Il ‘momento savonaroliano’ nel pensiero giuridico e politico del Quattrocento” in *Savonarola. Democrazia tirannide profetia*, ed. G.C. Garfagnini (Florence: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 1998) 3-16, especially where Quaglioni notes how “tyrant” and “tyranny” are always, in the XVth century, *nomina iuris*, “word/concepts of public common law not yet devoid of their technical legal meaning and reduced to pedagogical-political paradigm.”

to identify a tyrant according to Machiavelli.⁶⁰ Rather, the tyrant is the person who destroys the existing liberty of a political community, prompting its regress from “vivere civile” to an inferior form of life, and/or one who is ineffective in saving the State. He is therefore the perfect negative counterpart to that “prudent man” so often evoked and extolled in Machiavelli’s works. This confers a unique trait to Machiavelli’s republicanism.

Principality, politics and status necessitatis

Dolf Sternberger remarked that Machiavelli never uses the word “political”, or its equivalents, in the *Prince*.⁶¹ Maurizio Viroli went on to argue that the vocabulary of politics is only appropriate to the discourse on the city and therefore there is no reason to use it in the *Prince*, because the *Prince* is not a book on politics in this meaning of the word.⁶² Viroli is right, but I would qualify his statement: the *Prince* deals, as it were, with the “zero degree” of politics, namely the situation in which it is necessary to set up the conditions for the possibility of politics, creating *ex novo* or saving the political community. Machiavelli learnt well Thucydides’ lesson (the *soteria poleos* is the foremost consideration for a statesman) as well as the lesson of Roman political thought (*salus reipublicae suprema lex esto*).⁶³ I believe that the *Prince* should be read as a variation on the theme of the *status necessitatis*, namely on the extreme and exceptional condition in the life of a political community. It is not a matter of chance that, in his dedication to Lorenzo de’ Medici, Machiavelli writes that the only two qualities of his work that may appeal to Lorenzo are “the variety of the matter and the *gravity of the subject*”. I think these words have been carefully chosen and should be taken literally: the gravity of certain political situations requires a prince to adopt means that have grave moral consequences for his soul. The prince, especially the new prince, is often forced to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion, in order to preserve the State; to quote Machiavelli’s famous statement, he must “not depart from the

⁶⁰ Here Machiavelli differs also from many contemporary authors, such as his friend and correspondent Francesco Vettori, who still saw the legal origin, or legitimacy, of political power as defining the notion of tyranny. See F. Vettori, *Sommario della storia d’Italia in Scritti storici e politici* (Bari: Laterza, 1972) 145-6: “If we want to examine correctly what were the origins of kingdoms, we will find that all were taken either by force or by art [...] freely speaking, all governments are tyrannical.”

⁶¹ Dolf Sternberger, *Machiavelli’s ‘Prince’ und der Begriff des Politischen* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1974) 35.

⁶² Maurizio Viroli, “Machiavelli and the republican idea of politics” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 161; also Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.) Viroli, however, contradicts himself when he says that the *Prince* “is an integration to the language of politics,” because in Machiavelli’s times politics was identified with legislative activity, government and administration of justice inspired by the ideal civil community based on the rule of law: Viroli, *Machiavelli*, 55.

⁶³ See the dialogue between the Athenian ambassadors and the Melians in Thucydides V, 85-113.

good, if he can, but be able to enter evil, when forced.”⁶⁴ Evil is especially necessary when there is corruption in the State or when the political community faces destruction from the outside.⁶⁵ And there is corruption where laws favour only a segment of the community and favour the ambition of the powerful. In such a situation, the vocabulary of politics is perverted: “noxious” men are extolled as “industrious,” whereas good citizens are considered fools.⁶⁶

I agree with Nicola Matteucci’s observation that Machiavelli’s most important lesson was to show his readers “the seriousness of politics,” and to teach them the troubling truth that a statesman must be ready to “damn his own soul” in order to save the State.⁶⁷ We should trust the sincerity of this statement and remember that Machiavelli’s teaching, as he tells us time and again, stems from “a long experience of modern things and a continuous lesson of the ancient.”⁶⁸ More specifically, I believe that, in order to correctly appreciate the teaching of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, we ought to recall the lesson of the *Florentine Histories*, a work that revolves around “civil strifes and inner enmities,”⁶⁹ where we can better witness, and appreciate, his “experience of modern things.” Here, in a dry prose, Machiavelli describes the horrors, massacres and devastations that inner or outer wars, and their accompanying “lack of civility,” produce:

We cannot yet call wars those in which men are not killed, cities are not ravaged, principalities are not destroyed.⁷⁰

Here he reveals his contempt for the sordidness of Italian princes, who have only selfish aims, such as riches and self-protection, and who believe that they are able to elude the seriousness of politics through a clever answer or a polished letter.⁷¹ The condition of war and the absence of civility must be avoided at all costs and, in Machiavelli’s view, the only

⁶⁴ *Prince* 18; 19.

⁶⁵ *Prince* 19. *Discourses* II, 8; III, 43.

⁶⁶ *Florentine Histories* III, 5. In this shifting evaluation of human agency according to political circumstances one can detect once again a classical suggestion and, more specifically, a resemblance with Thucydides III, 82-84, where the Athenian historian says that civil war changes even the meaning of the word people use to evaluate human behaviour. Machiavelli was familiar with this Thucydidean narration, as it is proved by *Discourses* II, 2. See Marcello Simonetta, “Machiavelli lettore di Tucidide,” *Esperienze Letterarie* 22 (1997): 53-68.

⁶⁷ Nicola Matteucci, “Niccolò Machiavelli” in *Alla ricerca dell’ordine politico* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984) 57-65.

⁶⁸ *Prince*, *Epistola dedicatoria*.

⁶⁹ *Florentine Histories*, *Proem*.

⁷⁰ *Florentine Histories* V, 1.

⁷¹ *Florentine Histories* VIII, 19. See also *Art of War* VII in *Machiavelli. The Chief Works and Others*, transl. A. Gibbard, 2: 724.

solution is to recur to the power of the “kingly hand” of the prince, or, to put it mildly, to the wisdom of a “prudent man.”⁷²

There are thus situations in which principality is preferable to any other form of government. The different evaluation of monarchical government according to political circumstances is similar to the different evaluation of human agency in war or in peace: what is ignominious in peaceful times, such as breaking pacts and using fraud and deceit, is admissible in war, because “it is good to defend one’s country in whatever way it be done, whether it entails ignominy or glory.”⁷³ In the fight against the outer foe, and in order to save one’s own political community, there are different standards than those existing inside the city and in ordinary situations:

For when the safety of one’s country depends wholly 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 consideration being set aside, that alternative should be wholeheartedly adopted which will save the life and preserve the freedom of one’s country.⁷⁴

Ruling and law-giving according to reason and justice thus presuppose the existence of the State, of a political structure capable of exercising its jurisdiction on a people placed on a certain land. It is in the *status necessitatis* that the truth emerges that, before we can have politics and the rule of law, we need the strong hand of the prince in order to create or preserve the State.

The existence of a prince, of a “kingly or quasi-kingly hand”, that is recurring to “straordinari”, to extra-legal means, is suited to exceptional circumstances only, when what is at stake is to found a political community or save it from a civil war or from a possible servitude brought from outside. The clarity of vision and effectiveness in making decisions of a “virtuous prince” are in these cases unsurpassable.⁷⁵ As Machiavelli puts it in the final

⁷² *Discourses* III, 49. For a good analysis of the possible “accidents” that a statesman may face see J.P. McCormick, “Addressing the political exception: Machiavelli’s ‘accidents’ and the mixed regime,” *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993): 888-900. I agree with McCormick that Machiavelli strongly prefers the legal over the extra-legal means of defending a regime.

⁷³ *Discourses* III, 41. This is also the reason why Hannibal is praised for his “unhuman cruelty” at war (*Prince* 17), while Agatocles and Oliverotto are considered bad rulers: they were unnecessary cruel in times of peace and inside their political community, with no real *political* necessity. This is confirmed with utmost clarity by a scathing remark about the Duke of Athens, who, although did not happen to rule in an extraordinary situation, “wanted the servitude, not the benevolence of men; he therefore desired more to be feared than to be loved.”

⁷⁴ *Discourses* III, 41. This applies to the extraordinary situation. Normal times, ordinary life are different. Machiavelli himself wrote *La Mandragola* and knew art and humour, but only the existence of the State enables men to enjoy these common pleasures.

⁷⁵ *Discourses*, I, 9; I, 17; I, 18; I, 45. Accordingly, Machiavelli says that the fundamental task of the prince is to make preparations for war: *Prince* 14. Cf. *Discourses* II, 26.

section of the *Prince*, the most honourable thing for a man is to bring order to a political community.⁷⁶ Indeed, as he adds in the *Discourses*, “should a good prince seek wordly renown, he should most certainly covet possession of a city that has become corrupt, not, with Caesar, to complete its spoliation, but, with Romulus, to reform it.” The reason is that the founders of a republic or a kingdom acquire eternal glory whereas tyrants are despised.⁷⁷ However, Machiavelli shows himself to be well aware of the difficulties and ambiguity inherent in “recurring to the extraordinary, that is to violence and to arms,” that is, to becoming prince of a city in order to reform its laws and customs and thus create a free and well-ordered community. The very idea of a “virtuous prince” almost seems a contradiction in terms, because the qualities a prince needs in these extraordinary cases seem almost opposite to those that characterize the virtuous man:

to reconstitute political life in a city presupposes a good man, whereas to have recourse to violence in order to make oneself prince of a republic presupposes a bad man.⁷⁸

Moreover, as Machiavelli clearly states in the *Prince*, after founding a State, the prince must “ornate” it and invigorate it with “good laws, good arms, good friends and good examples.”⁷⁹ This is the goal a good prince must pursue once he has set the State straight: he has to make his land great and flourishing.⁸⁰ In Machiavelli’s view, however, principality is always connected to a short term perspective. In the long run, it is meant to be superseded by a republican government that permits genuine “vivere libero.” Machiavelli states clearly, in *Discourses* I, 2, that there is a “perfect and true goal” for political communities, which should be identified with enjoying freedom and its fruits for the longest possible time allowed by the frailty of human affairs.⁸¹ Stability is one of the fundamental standards by which one should judge how good a regime is and, in this respect, republican government fares much better than principality, which is characterized by an unavoidable, short duration.⁸² This is clear in *Discourses* I, 58: princes are superior in

⁷⁶ *Prince* 26.

⁷⁷ *Discourses* I, 10.

⁷⁸ *Discourses* I, 18. This is the problem faced by Pier Soderini in III, 3.

⁷⁹ *Prince* 24.

⁸⁰ *Prince* 6.

⁸¹ *Discourses* I, 2.

⁸² I cannot agree with Daniela Coli, who believes that the problem of tyranny in Machiavelli does not concern the rule of one person but rather the duration of his rulership. “When a govern lasts too long can generate a tyranny,” she writes in “Realtà e utopia nel pensiero di Machiavelli” in *Savonarola. Democrazia, tirannide, profetia*, ed. G. Garfagnini, 115-123, cf. 117.

ordering new political communities, but people are superior in “keeping things ordered.”⁸³ Furthermore, thanks to the diversity of citizens inhabiting it, a republic adapts more readily to the “quality of times,” one of the fundamental ingredients for political success and for the stability of a State.⁸⁴

I therefore believe that Machiavelli is far from declaring the autonomy of politics from morality (in the famous phrasing of Benedetto Croce.) Nor is he paving the way to a transition from ‘politics’ to ‘reason of State;’ the two coexist in his thought, because there are circumstances when *arcana imperii* and “*straordinari*” are the only means to save civility, which is, however, the final goal of the statesman. I believe, instead, that Machiavelli is persuaded that moral life is possible only inside a genuine political community, just like the classical authors who influenced him. Where there is not an authentic State, there is neither politics nor morality, because human beings pursue only their selfish drives, which conflict with virtue and the common good. And there is no genuine political community where the State is plagued by factional strife or is subject to foreign powers. The categorical imperative for a real statesman is, therefore, to create or preserve the political community, which is the necessary condition for living a genuinely human life. Accordingly, I would not dismiss the final chapter of the *Prince* as a rhetorical exercise; instead, I am inclined to think that it draws the logical and practical conclusion of the argument of the whole book. For there Machiavelli insists that this is the right time for a “new prince, prudent and virtuous” to put Italy together after freeing it from foreign domination; he will acquire greatness and glory and Italy will recover its liberty and the accompanying goods, including moral and political virtue. Machiavelli knows this is the most appropriate time for such action because Italy’s dire situation make it “more in slavery than the Jews, more servant-like than the Persians, more dispersed than the Athenians”; this is a perfect reprise of the argument of chapter 6, where the merits of Moses, Cyrus and Theseus in putting together their respective states are extolled. Indeed, the comparison goes so far as to hint to the similitude between Moses’ “great preceptor” and the divinely inspired destiny of Lorenzo de’ Medici, announced by “extraordinary facts, without comparison and brought about by God.”⁸⁵

⁸³ *Discourses* I, 58. However, Machiavelli’s experience and classical suggestions, prompt him to believe that “it is impossible to constitute a republic that shall last fo ever, since there are a thousand unpredictable ways in which its downfall may be brought about.” *Discourses* III, 17.

⁸⁴ *Discourses* III, 9.

⁸⁵ See *Prince* 6 and 26 and compare with *Discourses* I, 56 at the beginning.

The novelty of Machiavelli's teaching and the literary genre of the Prince

What, then, is the real novelty in Machiavelli's concept of tyranny? After reviewing the evidence, I think we can state without hesitation that all of Machiavelli's works issue an utter condemnation of tyranny: tyranny is always evil and life under a tyrant is always bad. However, whether a certain behaviour or course of action are self-indulgent and tyrannical (and therefore condemned) or prudential and aimed at the salvation of the State (and therefore justified or even extolled) depends on the political circumstances and on the end. A political act by itself retains moral connotations (i.e. it is cruel or base) but no political value; the political circumstances and the end pursued confer political significance to it and prompt Machiavelli's clear discrimination between tyranny and principality. The very same act might or might not be tyrannical according to the context: the judgment is exquisitely political and context-sensitive.⁸⁶ The tyrant simply takes advantage of the existing corrupted matter and is the final outcome of the process of corruption; the prince aims at redeeming the State from corruption. As for principality and republic, it is the "quality of the times" that determines which one is preferable or more appropriate. Principality is not simply the bad counterpart to good government, republic. Circumstances –such as the existence of "corrupt matter" (which is defined by lack of equality and neglect of the common good on the citizens' part, leading to civil strife),⁸⁷ or the presence of a foreign foe capable of destroying the political community- determine which alternative is most likely to result in the citizens' well-being.⁸⁸ In a perfect world, citizens' liberty and well-being would be best served by a republican form of government, in which all citizens participate in the creation of those laws by which the whole community is governed.⁸⁹ But Machiavelli knows all too well that we do not live in a perfect world.

⁸⁶ I agree with Roberto Esposito that "Machiavelli rejects the 'anti-tyrannical' foundation of the political:" see his "La fondazione etica della politica. Il mito del tiranno tra 'Antico' e Rinascimento" in *Ordine e conflitto* (Naples: Liguori, 1984) 72.

⁸⁷ *Discourses* I, 45. The "vivere politico ed incorrotto" is that in which all citizens live in "identical equality" and where there are no gentlemen that "rule over castles" according to their own laws and with soldiers and courtesans. In *A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence*, 103, we read: "The reasons why all these governments have been defective is that the alterations in them have been made not for the fulfilment of the common good, but for the strengthening and security of the party."

⁸⁸ Here, too, I find a big difference between the usual cold prose of Machiavelli the political scientist and his republican *pathos*. In *Discourses* I, 35, where he recommends to republics to give full powers to one citizen only for a short period of time and within legal constraints, Machiavelli observes that it is "of no consequence whether the material be corrupt, for absolute power will very soon corrupt it by making friends and partisans."

⁸⁹ I share, in conclusion, the image of Machiavelli as an inherently republican author, put forth by such authors as Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli. However, I find that this image should be more complex and nuanced, adding a fair appreciation of the *Prince*, and a correct recollection of all the passages (and there

The “long experience of modern things” and of the ways of the world made Machiavelli aware of the foremost problem of his days. For it told Machiavelli that his were times of extraordinary instability, in which the very existence of a state was continuously in peril. The “constant reading of ancient things” furnished him with the solution. Since the existence of the political community is the prerequisite for human excellence and the moral life, the first task of the statesman and the good citizen is to create and to preserve an authentic political community. This task entails the possession of a character that enables the statesman to see what the right course of action is in an ever-changing world, where all sorts of “accidents” befall the State. Moreover, the good citizen and the real statesman must be able to detect the “accidents” from afar. This is an almost literal Aristotelian quote:

To discern a growing evil at the commencement is not any ordinary person’s work but needs a statesman.⁹⁰

And Machiavelli’s suggestion that the real statesmen should make their response adequate to the “quality of times” is built on the Aristotelian persuasion that this is possible only through an acquired disposition that enables the statesman to correctly judge the situation and take the right course of action. On the citizen’s part, this ‘political art’ entails the ability of judging when the circumstances require him to take energetic action in politics; on the ruler’s part, it enables him to be “impetuous” or “respectful” in different situations. These capacities can be acquired only through a proper political education, which should include both an appreciation of the reality in which we live in and a vision of the ideal we should attain. Machiavelli’s political philosophy, though professing realism and eschewing edification, cannot help but being edifying.

I believe that the insistence on the necessity of mastering the “quality of the times” on the basis of an acquired character makes the *Prince* (and the *Discourses*) as far removed as possible from a compilation of precepts or a casuistry work; far from purporting to give advice about how to maintain princely power in all circumstances, these works aim at the

are many!) of the *Discourses* where Machiavelli explicitly addresses princes. This fact inclines me to think that he has always both regimes in his mind, whose choice depends on circumstances.

I am not concerned here with the practical import of Machiavelli’s republicanism on contemporary politics. For this, and a critique of the ‘Cambridge School’ approach, see J.P. McCormick, “Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School’s ‘Guicciardinian moments,’” *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 615-643. I share, however, McCormick perplexity about Machiavelli’s contribution to contemporary republican theory. As I try to show in this essay, Machiavelli’s lasting legacy and perennial role is as a political educator of true statesmen.

⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics* V 7, 1308a33-35 (transl. H. Rackham.) Almost literally in *Discourses* I, 18.

permanent education of the real statesman.⁹¹ It is this kind of education, and not the single *ad hoc* recommendation, that will enable the genuine statesman to choose the right course of action in the particular circumstances in which he will happen to act. Indeed, reflecting on the most difficult question whether it is possible to keep, or set up, a free state in a corrupt city, Machiavelli flatly states that it is almost impossible to give a rule on this subject, because “it would be necessary to proceed according to the degrees of corruption.”⁹² Such method would be casuistical; Machiavelli prefers to leave the solution to the exercise of acquired prudence in the specific circumstances. Perhaps because of the beautiful prose or the sometimes cynical content, critics have focussed too much on Machiavelli’s recommendations on how to counteract the “accidents” that may arise in the exercise of power; conversely, they have often downplayed his insistence on the permanent lesson a wise reader can draw from his works. They have emphasized too much the *remediï* and neglected the *regola generale* that Machiavelli extracts from his knowledge of the things ancient and modern.

Machiavelli is persuaded that in times of dire trouble a political community must be “brought back to its own principles” and this can happen in two different ways, “either for an outer accident or for an inner prudence.”⁹³ His account of how some “individual good men” saved an imperiled State or a decaying religious sect induces us to believe that his aim was to educate such good men and therefore diminish the importance of fortune in favor of reliance on “prudence,” that is political ability. Such good, prudent men are able to provide those “good laws and good examples” that can bring back a threatened State or a faltering religion to their “principles,” renovating and thus saving them.

In this perspective, I find it very meaningful that both in the *Prince* and in the *Discourses* (allegedly dedicated to an examination of the republican form of government) Machiavelli always speaks to the statesmen of both forms of government, as it is shown by the recurring phrase “therefore a republic or a prince should so act.” His goal is to permanently teach the reader, especially the young reader,⁹⁴ and turn him into a genuine

⁹¹ Gian Mario Anselmi, “L’apprendistato del saggio tra Machiavelli e Guicciardini,” in *Cultura e scrittura di Machiavelli*, 263-277 notes how in Machiavelli (and Guicciardini) political and military education are linked to an “apprenticeship in wisdom,” in the style of Seneca and Petrarch.

⁹² *Discourses* II, 18. Again, in *Prince* 9 Machiavelli gives the general recommendation that the prince should strive to have the people on his side but, since there are many ways to achieve this, “which vary according to the subject, it is not possible to give a precise rule.”

⁹³ *Discourses* III, 1. Cf. III, 22. On the importance of this theme see the very interesting work by M. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli’s Theory of Political Freedom*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2000.

⁹⁴ *Discourses* II, *Proem*.

statesman, capable of making the right decisions in different circumstances and able to avoid choices that knowledge of history reveals to be notoriously wrong. For all ancient and modern examples show that tyrants live a sad life, continuously haunted by fear, and are held in contempt once dead. However, men are often driven by ambition⁹⁵ and deluded by a “false good and a fake glory:” Machiavelli’s goal is, therefore, to teach the real (common) good to the statesman, which will make him acquire glory. Machiavelli believes he can accomplish this by creating, in an Aristotelian fashion, a *habitus*, a virtuous disposition in the statesman, not by giving him single precepts: his work is in the literary genre of a *politikè methodos*, not a work of casuistry. Machiavelli consistently spurs statesmen to “read the histories” because of the perennial teaching they can draw from them and even addresses contemporary philosophical issues in order to give a proper education to the prospective statesman.⁹⁶ He reveals himself to be acutely aware of the importance of education,⁹⁷ to the point that he accuses the Church and Christian religion of teaching men only humility and contempt for worldly matters, rendering them less “lovers of liberty” and less prone to fight for the common good. Our religion has made the world “effeminate and heaven powerless,” he laments, and as a consequence republics are rare today.⁹⁸ Finally, Machiavelli wants to show how the neglect of the common good results in factional strife and, ultimately, in tyranny, which are the worst dangers for “vivere civile”, the foundation of citizens’ well-being. In this respect, the *Prince* and the *Discourses* are faithful to Aristotle, and to the lesson of the classics, even more than all the previous and contemporary works of the Italian republican tradition.

⁹⁵ *Art of War*, where Machiavelli says that ambition perverts judgment and makes men become tyrants.

⁹⁶ I do not see, otherwise, the point of inserting general philosophical notions as the possible eternity of the world into a political treatise (and even entering a debate about it): see *Discourses* II, 5. True, from his philosophical vision Machiavelli draws the important political point of the necessity of violence in the foundation of something new.

⁹⁷ *Discourses* III, 31, where a person nobility or baseness are attributed to the “education with which you have been brought up.” Cf. III, 46, where a family’s good customs are not attributed to the lineage but to the “different way in which one family and another educate their children.”

⁹⁸ *Discourses* II, 2. Cf. *Discourses* I, *Proem*, where Machiavelli speaks of the “weakness into which the present religion has brought the world,” and *Discourses* I, 12 on the moral and political damages caused by the Roman Church.