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MACHIAVELLI AND THE SURVIVAL OF THE STATE

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Key to approach Machiavelli is to understand his conception of man. “[...] [M]en are wretched creatures [...]. [...] [S]o simple, and so much creatures of circumstance [...].”¹ “[...] All men are evil and they will always act according to the wickedness of their nature whenever they have the opportunity.”² Therefore, in view of such an inevitable, permanent factor, he who deals with the task of ordering a group of men has to work with this raw material of imperfection. The way to model it is by means of power and deception, by forcing this rational, selfish being to act according to the desires of its ruler.

Fabrizio says in Machiavelli’s *Art of War* that he has “[...] never used war as an art, because [his] art is to govern [his] subjects and to defend them, and, so as to be able to defend them, to love peace and know how to make war.”³ What is the “art of war” for Machiavelli and how is this concept depicted in his three major political works —*The Prince*, *Discourses on Livy*, and *Art of War*—?

The argument of this essay is that this “art” —which Machiavelli thinks crucial for the ruling politician— is the ability in the use of political force. As politics is a continuous struggle, in order to keep dominion over his state, the ruler has to be

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¹ *The Prince*, translated by George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 100.

² *Discourses on Livy*, translated with and Introduction and Notes by Julia Conaway and Peter Bonadella (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28.

³ Translated, Edited and with a Commentary by Christopher Lynch, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19.

prepared to face internal and external threats from political enemies; the ruler has to be at the same time a commander and a politician —a “fox” and a “lion,” Machiavelli would say. In *Art of War* and the *Discourses on Livy*, this idea is depicted in a subtle way; while, in *The Prince*, it is openly stated as fundamental true of politics; nonetheless, the conception of the art of war —as fundamental for every ruler, regardless the regime, as the way to face internal and external rivals— stands as a core idea for Machiavelli’s political thought in the three of them.

AN UNFORTUNATE ENVIRONMENT

In such a Machiavellian world of “evil,” selfish “creatures” who just seek to impose their will and to advance their interests, politics cannot be another thing rather than a brutal “struggle for power,”⁴ as Morgenthau would say. Reverting Clausewitz’s definition, Foucault says that “[p]ower is war, war by other means.”⁵ Any actor is surrounded by an environment —his reality— formed by other actors, their expected behavior, the current disparities of power, and the available information he and the others have.⁶ In accordance with these constraints imposed by the environment, actors behave. The endless war named “politics” is the politician’s environment; therefore, he behaves accordingly.

Regardless of the regime, a ruler is a member of the political group which has achieved a dominant position over other political groups in the internal struggle for power. The ruling group of a political system has two major concerns: first, to survive in its position of primacy against its internal and external rivals, and second, to establish an order which enhances its legitimacy before the society it rules.

In order to accomplish these two needs, the use of political force and the ability in it —the “art of war”— is necessary. Nowadays, in internal affairs, political force is called “police” and in external ones, “military” —although, in extreme cases, the ruling political group may resort to the military to act in the internal political system, too. However, in Machiavelli’s times, the military force was

⁴ *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), *passim*.

⁵ *Defender la sociedad. Curso en el Collège de France (1975-1976)*, 6th reprint, translated to Spanish by Horacio Pons (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014), 28.

⁶ See: Jeffrey A. Frieden, “Actors and Preferences in International Relations”, in Davis A. Lake and Robert Powell (eds.), *Strategic Choice and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 45.

indistinguishable between its internal and international tasks —armies did not have euphemistic names, some centuries ago. This is the reason why Machiavelli does not make a distinction between one another; despite he refers to both.

Thus, the ethical foundations of a ruler are different from those of the common man;

[he] cannot observe all those things which give men a reputation for virtue, because in order to maintain his state he is often forced to act in defiance of good faith, of charity, of kindness, of religion. And so he should have a flexible disposition, varying as fortune and circumstances dictate. [...] [H]e should not deviate from what is good, if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil, if that is necessary.⁷

In other words, the ruler has to consider the “ancient orders” and realize that, for a politician to succeed in the struggle for power, he has to raise his force and “[...] have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organization, and its discipline.”⁸ Because “nothing would be found more united, more in conformity, and, of necessity, as much inclined toward one another as these [—civilian (political) and military lives].”⁹

TO “LOVE PEACE”

There is no peace in equity because, in a world where every being acts as he desires, following only his own selfish interests, clashes —struggles with other selfish beings— are the rule, as Hobbes would say about the “state of nature.”¹⁰ Peace only arises from order and this from the inequity in the distribution of power. Thus, peace is nothing but a petrified state of war in which one political group has achieved dominance over its rivals; nevertheless, this does not mean that the rivals’ interests have changed, only that their pursuit has been delayed until the imposed order can be overthrown. Such is the struggle for power which takes place within an internal political system.

Domination can only be achieved and maintained by means of political power and, as stated above, this derives from the capacity a certain group has to infringe

⁷ *The Prince*, *op. cit.*, 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹ “Preface,” *Art of War*, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹⁰ See: *Leviathan*, edited with an Introduction by C. B. Macpherson (London: Penguin Books, 1985), *passim*.

damages through violence. Therefore, a task for the ruling group is to maintain and, if possible, increase the disparity of the distribution of power which makes such preeminence possible. Either in what Machiavelli calls a “free government (a republic)” or in a monarchy or an aristocracy, law —the established order— has to be maintained by the necessary means —even if that implies resorting to violence.

When a threatening problem arose in the Roman republic —“brought about [either] by internal and external causes”—, a “dictator” was called to deal with it by the means he considered necessary —Machiavelli says that this savior of the state was even allowed to “[...] punish[...] anyone without appeal”—; nonetheless, he could not legislate nor change the institutions, so the republic was kept safe.¹¹ This was the extreme case in which the group ruling the republic defended its state. The “art of war,” regarding internal enemies, is the concerning art even for a republic. Besides this extreme example, Machiavelli, throughout the *Discourses on Livy*, argues for the continuous and equal application of the laws of the republic toward its inhabitants, in order to reduce threats to its existence. Regarding the case of the institution of the decemvirate in Rome, which rapidly became a tyranny of ten individuals, Machiavelli argues that “[...] all law givers in republics or kingdoms [should] more quick [...] restrain human appetites and [...] deprive people of all hope of being able to do evil with impunity,”¹² in order to maintain the state.

In the case of non-republican regimes, Machiavelli accentuates, even more, the importance of the “art of war” in the internal struggle —of the political use of force in order to keep the uneven distribution of power which makes possible the survival of the state—:

one must urgently arrange matters so that when they no longer believe they can be made believe by force. [...] [O]nce they have succeeded and begin to be venerated, having destroyed those who were invidious of their abilities, they stay powerful, secure, respected, and happy.¹³

Regardless of the regime, in order to defeat internal rivals, in order to maintain the disequilibrium which makes ruling possible, any state has to prepare itself in the knowledge and practice of “art of war.” As Machiavelli summarizes, “The

¹¹ *Discourses on Livy*, *op. cit.*, BOOK I, CHAPTERS 33, 34 and 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, BOOK I, CHAPTER 42.

¹³ *The Prince*, *op. cit.*, 52.

main foundations of every state [...] are good laws and good arms; and [...] you cannot have good laws without good arms, and where there are good arms, good laws inevitably follow.”¹⁴ This is what Machiavelli talked about when, in the voice of Fabrizio, he says that “[the ruler’s] art is to govern [his] subjects and to defend them, and, so as to be able to defend them, to love peace [...]” The dominant loves his peace, established through war; the dominated unwillingly accepts it but he does not forget the nature of this sign of fake good will.

TO MAKE WAR

While the state fights to maintain its dominion in the internal political system, simultaneously, another struggle takes place: the one for international supremacy. As the logics of politics are the same despite their level of interaction, the instrument to face the political rivals does not change; the primacy of force remains. Nevertheless, in international politics, the state is immersed in an environment where violent power is balanced, leaving the state less space for action.

In the external struggle, the rivals are other states which, in order to advance their interests and acquire a more secure position in an anarchical system, try to expand its power and its rule over political units alien to them. Therefore, the military has to be prepared to face external threats, as well. This is the other side of Machiavelli’s argument of the “art of war” as an essential art for the ruler of the state; he who rules has to be prepared to face threats from those who want to overthrow him and dominate over his state.

As Machiavelli says,

[t]here are two things a prince must fear: internal subversion from his subjects; and external aggression by foreign powers. Against the latter, his defense lies in being well armed and having allies; and if he is well armed he will have good allies.¹⁵

Because “[n]evertheless, [...] men cannot live in security without power.”¹⁶ Thus, every state has to face two kinds of eternal threats from two different struggles for power which, at the same time, share the same rules —those of politics. The “art of

¹⁴ *The Prince*, 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁶ *Discourses on Livy, op. cit.*, BOOK I, CHAPTER 1.

war” focuses on the control of both the internal and external sources of risk for the survival of the state.

THE ART OF THE RULER

After the analysis made above, it can be deduced that the main instrument in the political war is the armed forces. On this, Machiavelli warns the politician that “[...] unless it commands its own arms no [political group]* is secure, it is dependent on fortune, since there is no valour and no loyalty to defend it when adversity comes.”¹⁷ Therefore, the ruler has to create a military body capable of responding efficiently in defense of the state, even if that means risking its own lives.

Such an organization has to be conformed of people “drawn through the respect that they have for the [ruler], where they fear his disdain more than present pain;”¹⁸ Besides, it is desirable the presence of religion, devotion and dependence on the leader, as factors for increasing the loyalty of the armed wing of the political group, says Machiavelli.¹⁹ The ruler has to be one with his guardians; the guardians one with his leader. Thus, even the problem of the civil-military relations has no place in the equation; it is no a possibility where war is the ruler’s art and he is, at the same time, both a politician and a commander.

The duty —and the objective— of the ruling group is to maintain its primacy and the state where this is exercised. Therefore, the ruler has to be capable of resorting to any means needed in order to accomplish his task. In the struggle for power —the endless war permeating every level of politics—, he who rules...

[...] is forced to know how to act like a beast, he must learn from the fox and the lion; because the lion is defenseless against traps and a fox is defenseless against wolves. Therefore, one must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves.²⁰

Thus, is the “art of war”, the “art of the ancients;” crucial instrument for the politician, damnation for the common man.

* In the original text, the word used by Machiavelli is “PRINCIPALITY;” nevertheless, as this concept implies at the same time both a type of regime and a ruling political group within a certain political system, it has been substituted by a more generic synonym: “POLITICAL GROUP.”

¹⁷ *The Prince*, *op. cit.*, 87.

¹⁸ *Art of War*, *op. cit.*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 98, 99, *et passim*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, 99.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Within war lie the seeds of peace; within peace, those of war. Every remedy is palliative; the struggle for power, between pairs in the international system and between the dominant and the dominated in the internal system, is eternal. He who is immersed in it either works within its narrow limits —with its imperfect and mundane logics and forces— or perishes before those fitted for the task.

Fabrizio says that he has “never used war as an art;” it would be more accurate for him to say that he had “never realized war is an art.” Throughout his interventions in Machiavelli’s work, Fabrizio proves his ability in the use and the knowledge of such an art. “[...] [M]y art is to govern my subjects and to defend them, and, so as to be able to defend them, to love peace and know how to make war,” he says, but is there any other way to “govern,” “defend,” “bring peace,” and “make war” rather than that of the “art of war”? For Machiavelli, there is none.

Derived from the very logics of the political struggle, he who wants to survive and succeed resorts to the ancient orders. Thus, the “art of war” is...

[...] so useful that besides enabling hereditary princes to maintain their rule it frequently enables ordinary citizens to become rulers. [...] The first way to lose your state is to neglect the art of war; the first way to win a state is to be skilled in the art of war.²¹

This is the core idea which binds together Machiavelli’s political works; it is the foundation of his political thought. “*Si vis pacem, para bellum;*” if you want peace, prepare for war. Such is politics, the survival of the fittest in a never-ending struggle among the fittest.

²¹ *The Prince, op. cit.*, 87.

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