A Modern Interpretation of Machiavelli's Political Cycle

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Abstract. In the Discourses, Machiavelli refers early on to Polybius' cycle of regimes; however, he will not make much use of it afterwards. He still refers to a particular cycle, but one implicit in his writings and substantially different from Polybius. I propose in this paper to reconstruct Machiavelli's own political cycle, using the modern language of rationality and emotions in an agent-based model. Our starting point will be a list of individual motivations, their interplay in political action, and their effects on the regime. We will find in Machiavelli's work a model founded on three types of regimes – tyranny, principality, and republic – and a cycle of foundation, succession, degeneration, corruption, and refoundation of the regimes.

Keywords. Machiavelli; Polybius; cycle of regimes; rationality; emotions.

Résumé. Dans les Discours, Machiavel fait référence tôt au cycle des régimes de Polybe; cependant, il n'en fera pas grand usage par la suite. Il se réfère toujours à un cycle particulier, mais de manière implicite dans ses écrits et substantiellement différent de celui de Polybe. Je propose dans cet article de reconstruire le propre cycle politique de Machiavel, en utilisant le langage moderne de la rationalité et des émotions dans un modèle fondé sur l'agent. Notre point de départ sera une liste de motivations individuelles qui interagissent dans l'action politique et des effets sur le régime. Nous trouverons dans l'œuvre de Machiavel un modèle fondé sur trois types de régimes – tyrannie, principauté et république – et un cycle de fondation, succession, dégénérescence, corruption et refondation des régimes

Mots clefs. Machiavel; Polybe; cycle des régimes; rationalité; émotions.

Introduction

Since the last century, many scholars have offered interpretations of Machiavelli's political system, especially in relation to republicanism. The vast majority of these works turn out to be complex and quite hard to follow however, mainly because Machiavelli himself presented his thoughts in a convoluted manner. While the tradition in Machiavellian political studies is to dive as deep as possible into the texts in order to retrieve as much concepts and relationships as possible, I propose in this paper to reconstruct Machiavelli's political system using a "bare bones" approach. Machiavelli himself proposed a simplified model largely based on Polybius' cycle of regimes (*D*, 1, II/195-201)[1], but as is well-known, he did not make much use of it afterwards.[2] I am convinced that a similar model can be built from a set of human motivations and social mechanisms found in Machiavelli's works. The originality of my approach resides in the "misuse" of many notions found in Machiavelli and my "translation" of them in the modern language of rationality and emotions.

In the Polybian cycle or *anacyclosis*, Machiavelli tells us that there are six types of regimes, three good (principality, aristocracy, democracy) and three bad (tyranny, "government by the few", anarchy). The good regimes are maintained by people who work for the common good, and the bad ones by people who work only for themselves. The passage from good to bad is caused by the forgetfulness of men, who let go of the necessity of insuring stability, and the reverse passage is caused by the masses revolting against their corrupt leaders. The ideal republic according to Machiavelli is a balanced mixture of all three good regimes sustained by institutions, of which Rome is the prime example[3]. The three main features of the Polybian cycle are first, that the decline of regimes is natural and inevitable; second, that the main degenerative mechanism is the forgetfulness of successive rulers; and third, that the nature of each regime depends entirely on which preceded it. I will contend that Machiavelli fully endorses the first feature, but that he has reservations about the other two.

The system I will try to reconstruct will be composed of three regimes: tyranny, principality and republic. They will be differentiated by the prevalent type of power relations, respectively personal power, informal legitimate authority, and formal legitimate authority. The actors of these regimes are by and large rational, but they can often exhibit irrational motivations like ambition, goodwill, and contempt. They can also show *virtù*, a disposition to act rationally with the common good in mind. These motivations will be the subject

of the first part of this paper. The second part will introduce the "humors", or the two fundamental political classes of the Great (*il grandi*) and the masses, along with the social mechanisms managing their interaction. We will expose the political system in the third part, which will consist of a cycle of foundation, succession, degeneration, corruption, and refoundation of the regime.

Rational and irrational motivations

It seems rather self-evident to refer to rational choice in reconstructing Machiavelli's political philosophy. His analyses are almost always founded on individual action,[4] and time and again, he tells us about people deliberately maximizing their interests. There is a variant of rational-choice theory proposed by Jon Elster (1999) called the "mixed-motivations" model, that distinguishes rational from emotional motivations. While many rational-choice models treat emotional motivations as if they were subtle forms of rationality, the mixed-motivations model claims that emotions can often bias or even block the cognitive capacities necessary for rational decision-making, therefore making a strong case to keep these motivations separate.

Machiavelli's method in describing political life consists in attributing a series of specific motivations to idealized individual agents, then characterizing social phenomena as interplay between these motivations,[5] Among them, Machiavelli relates love, fear, and hatred to calculated interest, so we will classify them as rational motivations. As we will see, Machiavelli excuses many such behaviors precisely because the agent is deliberately pursuing his interest. On the other hand, there is a set of motivations that prevents rational behavior, what we call emotional motivations. We identify two main types: ambition, which makes the agent prefer destructive goals, and goodwill (and its converse contempt), which prevents the agent from properly evaluating his interest.

Machiavelli asserts that "men are driven chiefly by two things: love and fear" (*D*, 3, XXI/477). According to *The Prince*, chapter XVII, the difference is between choice and necessity: "For love is held by a chain of duty which, since men are bad, they break at every chance for their own profit; but fear is held by a dread of punishment that never fails you" (*P*, XVII/62), and further, "men love at their own choice and fear at the prince's choice" (64). Ideally, the Prince should seek to be feared without being hated, "this he will always achieve if he refrains from the property of his citizens and his subjects and from their women" (62-3; also *P*, XIX/67-8).

We propose to model love, fear, and hatred as motivations originating from a conscious and intentional evaluation of the situation; in other words, the agent adopts the attitude that maximizes his utility given the circumstances. The citizen acts out of *love* of the Prince whenever they share common interests, either naturally or stimulated by incentives from the Prince, and the citizen will rescind his love the moment the will of the Prince ceases to serve his own interest (Patapan 2006: 88). In order to secure the citizen's loyalty, the Prince should look to establish a relationship based on *fear*, by resorting to the threat of sanctions in such a way that it becomes in the interest of the citizen to obey. Love and fear thus become very similar rational motivations, but with a fundamental difference: love relies on benefits that the citizen can freely ignore whenever he loses interest, while fear relies on sanctions that are impossible to ignore. The citizen, however, can consider a sanction to be too severe; this would transform rational obedience into a will to rise up against the source of oppression. This new motivation is *hatred*, it appears when the utility of revolt (i.e. its cost/benefit ratio) for the agent becomes higher than the utility of coerced obedience[6].

Let us turn now to the emotional motivations, starting with *ambition*. Machiavelli refers to *avarice* sometimes, but it is essentially the same as ambition[7]. Ambition is a natural flaw that drives someone to try to possess everything. Machiavelli condemns this motivation in two passages:

> Whenever men cease fighting through necessity, they go to fighting through ambition, which is so powerful in human breasts that, whatever high rank men climb to, never does ambition abandon them. The cause is that Nature has made men able to crave everything but unable to attain everything. Hence, since men's craving is always greater than the power to attain, they are discontented with their acquirements and get slight satisfaction from them. (*D*, 1, XXXVII/272).

> Moreover, human wants are insatiable, since man has from Nature the power and wish to desire everything and from Fortune the power to attain but little; the result is unending discontent in human minds and weariness with what is attained. Hence the present is blamed, the past is praised, and the future is desired, even though men are not moved to act in this way by any reasonable cause. (*D*, 2, preface/323).

In the first passage, the agent driven by ambition incurs costs greater than the benefits, while in the second, his actions lack "reasonable cause". Machiavelli goes further in *The Golden Ass*, V, where he notes that faced with "the powerful" seized with ambition, "they are discontented who have lost, and hatred is stirred up to ruin the conquerors. (...) This appetite destroys our states; and the greater wonder is that all recognize this transgression, but no one flees from it" (in Gilbert, vol. 2: 762). The irrationality of ambition could not be clearer. Ambition is always a negative term, a character defect in Machiavelli's works (D'Amico 1997: 7).

The Prince can command obedience by means other than positive or negative incentives. He can also cultivate a reputation of leadership, which would make his followers obey naturally, in the sense that it would become "the natural thing to do" and not the result of calculation. *Goodwill* is the motivation that makes one follow the leader out of respect, and *contempt* the reverse motivation. We find a discussion of these motivations in *The Prince*, XIX, where Machiavelli urges the Prince to avoid being hated or despised. We already covered how to avoid hatred: do not put your subjects

in a situation in which it would be rational to engage in revolt. To avoid contempt, the Prince must acquire qualities found in good leaders: "It makes him despised to be considered changeable, light, effeminate, faint-hearted, irresolute -- from which a wise prince guards himself as from a shoal. He strives to make everyone recognize in his actions greatness, spirit, dignity, and strength" (68). Noteworthy in this chapter is the use of "goodwill" (*benivolenzia populare*) instead of "love" to describe the relationship based on reputation[8]. Goodwill is not a rational decision subject to evaluation like love, but an immediate obligation towards someone representing the values favored by the community.[9] The citizen obeys the Prince because he shares fundamental values with him, not because it is in his interest to do so. Obedience thus becomes an end in itself rather than a means to make a profit or to avoid punishment. Contempt arises when the Prince upholds values contrary to those favored by the people. Faraklas (1997: 58-60) first opposes contempt to fear then brings out a contradiction among the Great, as they appear to simultaneously fear and despise the people.[10] I believe it would be better to oppose contempt to goodwill on the basis of reputation. This allows us the possibility of an agent despising and fearing someone at the same time; for example, obeying the Prince out of fear of sanctions but without respecting his values, or in the case of the Great, showing contempt for the people while being careful not to provoke them into rebellion.

Virtù and fortune

For Machiavelli, successful political leaders either possess *virtù* or are the beneficiaries of good fortune. Machiavellian *virtù* is a surprisingly vague concept, considering the relative clarity of most of his other thoughts regarding human behavior.[11] I would not classify *virtù* as a motivation alongside rationality and the emotions. I propose rather to define it as the behavior of an agent capable of control over his emotions in order to make well-calculated and rational choices. Machiavelli always uses *virtù* as a mark of approval, so we can conclude that for him, good behavior is rational behavior, where passions are contained as much as possible.

Virtù is for Machiavelli a rare attribute. The vast majority of men cannot resist their passions. They are naturally biased towards immediate gratification to the detriment of their future. Beyond the rational -- emotional distinction, we come across a distinction between short-term and long-term rationality. In rational-choice theory, the satisfaction of immediate interests is not *ceteris paribus* less rational than long-term well-being. Machiavelli, however, is concerned with political life, and contrary to certain modern rationality-based schools of thought like libertarianism and "invisible hand" regulation of society, he remains highly skeptical of the possibility of a natural equilibrium in which the state could maintain a stable existence through the interaction of short-sighted rational agents. The fundamental dynamic of Machiavellian politics arises from this position: emotional and short-term selfish acts lead to serious collective-action problems that only men of *virtù*, or an especially favorable fortune, can solve. *Virtù* is the attribute of a rational agent who always takes into account the consequences of his actions on social equilibria, especially regarding the freedom of the state from which he draws important individual benefits of security and prosperity.

Fortune also plays an important role in maintaining stability and freedom in the state. In Machiavelli's work there are many allusions to fortune in a deterministic sense. However, this does not mean that there is some sort of historical "law" or "reason" at work in history. Machiavelli's determinism, if we can call it that, is limited by two considerations. First, knowledge of the future cannot be anything else than deduction, more or less intuitive or informed, based on observation of the present and understanding of the past, combined with certain postulates on human nature. There are no laws of history to be found in Machiavelli. Second, Machiavelli clearly indicates that choice remains available in fortune: "(...) Fortune may be mistress of one half our actions but that even she leaves the other half, or almost, under our control" *(P,* XXV/90). Even if "men are able to assist Fortune but not to twart her" (*D*, 2, XXIX/408), they remain capable of action based on prediction of the future, in the same way that we build dykes in expectation of a flood (*P*, XXV/90). I do not seek to neglect the role of fortune in Machiavelli. The agent is never entirely free in his actions; instead of deliberate choice, perhaps it would be better to speak of a will anchored on "necessity well understood" (Mansfield 1981: 303).[12] But in any case, as it is impossible for an agent to know the future, the exact meaning of fortune is not that much relevant to behavior. From the standpoint of the deciding agent there is no difference between random fortune and a deterministic but radically obscure fortune. In both cases the agent will calculate expected utility in exactly the same way.

The interplay of humors

Machiavelli's entire political theory relies on the antagonism between the two "humors" or political classes, the Great and the people. The first task of a leader is to maintain an orderly state of conflict among the humors in order to keep the state stable and strong, especially against foreign intervention. Before we elaborate on the cycle of regimes, we will build a model of the humors featuring the motivations we have just defined.

From the beginning, the Great and the people have opposite political objectives: "the people desire not to be bossed and oppressed by the rich; the rich desire to boss and oppress the people" (*P*, IX/39). These objectives are what separates them; not wealth, function, or any other social division (Lefort 1972: 382). In political life, each fears the other, as the Great happen to have access to a large amount of resources, and the people show strength in numbers. From this reciprocal existential threat, it is in the interest of each to have a ruler that will protect them against the other. The behavior of the people towards the ruler is shaped by rationality and goodwill, while the Great are mainly motivated by ambition, contempt and rationality, with little goodwill since most of them consider themselves equal to the ruler (*P*,

IX/39).[13] Machiavelli advises the ruler about three types of Great: he should "honour[] and love[]" those who "commit themselves" and are not "rapacious"[14], he should "make use" of those who are rational, and "fear" the ambitious (*P*, IX/40). Regarding the people, the ruler must keep himself on their good side, because being essentially stuck with them, he cannot just purge them as he can with the Great if things go sour. He will achieve this by inspiring fear without inciting hatred (rationality), and by commanding respect (goodwill). He must also manage to make the people "need the government and himself" (*P*, IX/42), which will sustain the rational love relationship.

The presence of both rationality and goodwill indicate that several kinds of power relationships can exist between the ruler and the ruled. Here I would like to go beyond Machiavelli and introduce a typology of power relations based on legitimacy that I hope will allow us to build a coherent cycle of regimes. The first type is brute power, sustained by positive and negative sanctions, which makes it in the interest of the ruled to obey. The main drawback of brute power is its cost, as a system of incentives (rewards, police, etc.) must be maintained at all times. To remedy this, a ruler can resort to legitimate authority. A power relationship is legitimate when the ruled actually wants to obey, regardless of sanctions.[15] I further distinguish between two kinds of legitimate authority: informal, in which obedience is perceived as a means to pursue one's own values, and formal, which is obedience to laws and institutions. In both cases, the relationship is de-personalized. In brute power the agent obeys a known Other, in informal legitimate authority he obeys through his own values, and in formal legitimate authority he obeys impersonal rules believed to be necessary to the functioning of society.

Returning to Machiavelli, a leader can legitimize his power by seeking obedience through goodwill instead of rationality. As we saw earlier, to attract goodwill the leader must respect the martial and religious values favored by his people.[16] He does not have to actually believe in those values; he has to at least *pretend* to be courageous, faithful, etc. while knowing when not to be according to the situation.[17] The illusion works, as "in general men judge more with their eyes than with their hands" (*P*, XVIII/66-7). They infer the motivation from the outcome; as long as the outcome is good,[18] they stand in a state of self-deception and do not perceive the hypocrisy. A small number of enlightened are able to see through the illusion but there is nothing they can do against the judgment of the masses[19] (P, XVIII/67).

To earn a good reputation one must know how to perform good deeds; but if a ruler is good only when it serves him, a citizen may love him if he also benefits from the deed, but he will not necessarily respect him. If a ruler wants to be respected while performing good deeds instrumentally, he must not appear to be motivated by rationality. Machiavelli saw this problem in the paradox of liberality: "(...) liberality, when so practiced that you get a reputation for it, damages you, because if you exercise that quality wisely and rightfully, it is not recognized, and you do not avoid the reproach of practicing its opposite" (*P*, XVI/59). If you show liberality only when necessary, "the masses will reckon that they do not have that benefit from you but from your adversaries; and since they properly will fear that when the necessity has passed you will take back what you have been forced to give them, they will not feel any obligation to you" (*D*, 1, XXXII/263). This is why "[p]rudent men always and in all their actions win credit from circumstances, even though necessity forces them to such acts in any case" (*D*, 1, LI/299): if you want to be known as a benefactor, your gesture must appear both deliberate and disinterested.

In short, the Great want to dominate the people, who evidently do not want to be dominated. Without a ruler to keep them apart, the conflict would quickly escalate, leading to a division of the state into factions and its eventual downfall (*D*, 1, VII/211-2). The ruler must earn the respect of agents disposed to goodwill, be either loved or feared by rational agents, and find a way to neutralize agents driven by ambition. The one thing most effective in keeping everyone in their place however is formal legitimate authority, in other words the laws and institutions of the state.

The cycle of regimes

The kind of authority a ruler will establish in a state will determine the kind of regime in place. We have retained three main regimes in Machiavelli's work; they will correspond to our typology of power previously mentioned. *Tyranny* is characterized by brute exercise of power; the tyrant does not look for goodwill and is content to rule with an iron hand. In a *principality* (including monarchy), brute power is still largely present but the ruler also seeks informal legitimacy, mainly by respecting -- or seeming to respect -- the values of the people. Lastly, in a *republic*, legitimacy is founded first and foremost on the laws and institutions of the state. Laws are also present in principalities; the more good laws there are, the less latitude a Prince enjoys (D, 1, LVIII/313-4), but for that type of regime the focus will be on values. In our model, following much of what Machiavelli has to say on the subject, we will treat tyranny as a degenerate form of government and direct our attention to the finer points distinguishing principalities and republics.

Foundation and succession

At the foundation of the state, even if fortune plays a capital role, and choice is always necessity well understood, nevertheless for Machiavelli the type of regime is at the discretion of the founder.[20] Circumstances merely suggest the appropriate regime. A republic is better suited to relative social equality, and a principality to inequality. Inequality is defined by the presence of "gentlemen", great landowners exercising power over their subjects and "altogether hostile to all free government" (*D*, 1, LV/308-9). A Prince needs them; they allow him to decentralize or shall we say "outsource" his brute personal power somewhat. If a founder decides against nature to establish a republic in inequality, he will have to eradicate the gentleman class, and if he wants to establish a principality in equality, he will have to create it

by conferring titles and wealth to certain individuals (*D*, 1, LV/309). In any case, the essential task of the founder is to promulgate the laws that will allow a non-destructive coexistence of the humors in the state. To this end he must act alone and hold great personal power over the citizenry for two reasons: first, citizens by themselves would never reach a reasonable agreement over the proper laws to adopt (*D*, 1, IX/218), and second, people are suspicious and incredulous of the new regime, while they have no qualms obeying the laws once established (*P*, VI/26-7). The founder must also be strong enough to resist the opposition from the beneficiaries of the previous regime. Without *virtù* however, such a founder might well drive his state to tyranny, intentionally or not. A good founder must imperatively put the interests of the state above his own and take the necessary decisions to ensure long-term stability even if it means foregoing immediate benefits for the people. It is the prerogative of the *virtuoso* founder.[21] He has to protect the interests of the state through written laws. Since *virtù* is so rare he must expect his successors to be careless or even ambitious, so he will take care to limit their power.

If the founder has enough *virtù* to provide his state with good institutions, his successor will not have to be as brilliant as himself to keep the state strong. In a principality, succession is primarily hereditary. As long as traditions and values are respected, a rational Prince can endure; if he tries to change everything he will not last long (*P*, II/12; *D*, 3, V/427). Since in a principality institutions have a lesser role, the stability of the state will depend on a contingency, the quality of the succession. Two consecutive *virtuoso* Princes "often do very great things and their fame rises to the sky" (*D*, 1, XIX/244); two weak Princes in succession will spell the doom of the state. In a republic, command of the state is confined to several individuals chosen by the people. The relative equality found in a republic allows for a greater selection of worthy candidates. Selection in a healthy republic is based on merit and reputation (*D*, 1, XX/246). The people can choose more wisely than a Prince, first because the former evaluates public service while the latter is more interested in private service to himself (D, 3, XXIV/504-7; McCormick 2001: 305), second because the people as a collective have a tendency to be more rational, and less prone to emotions than a Prince (*D*, 1, XLVII/294; *D*, 1, LVIII/316). The people also look for their own safety, which is always good for the state. We must note that in all kinds of regimes, succession can result from more or less violent overthrow, either from inside or outside. Machiavelli has much to say about this, but that would be a topic for another study.

Degeneration of the state

Machiavelli's state is entropic. It takes excellent men and institutions to hold it together, and all must adapt to an ever-changing fortune. We can find that in Machiavelli's various social mechanisms leading to degeneration, most of them essentially come down to a domination by ambitious Greats who rule for their own benefits or for their faction. Rarely will the people be in a position of unwarranted domination, but it is possible.[22] We have already seen how a principality can degenerate if the hereditary Princes are not up to the task, a mechanism not operative in republics. The Great have different strategies to grasp power within their reach, whether they face the informal legitimate authority of a Prince or the formal authority of the institutions of a republic.

In a principality, power relies chiefly on reputation. If a Prince can earn the esteem of the people, he will be able to guard himself against conspiracies from the Great, as the latter will never dare confront popular wrath (*P*, XIX/68-69; *D*, 3, VI/444). Fear of punishment can also discourage conspirators (*P*, XVII/62). In a well-ordered republic "where no evil has begun", nobody conspires against the state (*D*, 3, VI/444). As the locus of power in a principality resides mostly in the leader and little in the institutions, the struggle of the Great against the Prince must take place at a personal level. The Prince should keep the Great at a distance while making sure not to generate hatred, as that would motivate more extreme actions, and both should seek the good graces of the people.

In the republican system, institutions replace personality as the locus of power. Arbitration between humors is no longer the role of a single man, but of an impersonal magistrate that allows the people to indict overambitious citizens. Magistrates are imbued with formal legitimacy, they operate "without private forces and without foreign forces, which are the ones that ruin free government", rather with "public forces and means, which have their definite limits" (*D*, 1, VII/212). On top of their deterrent effect on potential enemies of the republic, magistrates provide "an outlet for the discharge of those partisan hatreds that develop in cities in various ways against various citizens" (*D*, 1, VII/211). Recourse to a reliable and neutral judiciary helps to avoid the kind of power struggle common in principalities, which leads to factions and the fractioning of the common interest into various group interests. Machiavelli strongly condemns indictments performed outside the judiciary (*calunnie, D*, 1, VIII/214-7). Such slanders work by stirring up prejudice in the people against a particular citizen, re-personalizing the power struggle that republican institutions seek to avoid.

Along with the formal legitimate authority of the republic comes a new type of power relation between the state and the Great. In a principality, the Prince has a duty to honor the Great who contribute positively to the state, but such honor can elevate the reputation of ambitious individuals to dangerous levels; against those the Prince must be ungrateful.[23] He must counteract such individuals through threat of punishment (*D*, 1, XXIX/259). A republic in a similar predicament relies instead on institutions: "the free community confers honors and rewards for certain honorable and established causes, and except for these does not reward or honor anybody" (*D*, 1, XVI/235), as opposed to the subjective evaluations of a Prince. An ambitious citizen can exploit this situation, earning public trust by pretending to work for the good of the state until his reputation is high enough to make an attempt on the seat of power (*D*, 1, XLVI/290-1). This works because on the one hand honors are given according to rules and as long as you respect them your reputation will

rise, and on the other hand people are easily fooled by individuals who seem to respect their values as embodied in the rules. The Prince appears to have an advantage in this situation. Since he rules alone, he has more freedom to intervene against an ambitious and hypocritical benefactor. Machiavelli proposes a peculiar strategy for republics: give honors to as much citizens as possible and let them compete against one another; that way, they will not covet the state (*D*, 1, XXX/261).

The other difficulty regarding reputation and republics concerns citizen gratitude towards an impersonal institution. For Lefort (1972: 494), republics are by nature ungrateful; those who earn honors in a republic do not feel they owe anything back to the state.[24] Since institutions are not capable of distinguishing hypocrites from genuinely good men, the latter might come to feel envy and resentment (*D*, 3, XVI/469). Institutions are unable to forge a love or fear relationship like a Prince can. We must not forget however the advantage of an impersonal reward and punishment system in serving the public interest.

Aside from ambition as a source of degenerative mechanisms, we must also add forgetfulness. We saw in the introduction that in the Polybian cycle, rulers forget over time how to properly manage the humoric conflict, with disastrous results. Forgetfulness and lack of interest are also present in the Machiavellian cycle. At the foundation, the ruler by necessity must address the problem of humoric conflict; however, in periods of stability, rulers lacking *virtù* neglect their duty and thus increase power opportunities for ambitious Greats and the possibility of faction formation. Even considering that republics include laws regulating the humors, "[t]hese legal means need to be brought to life by the wisdom of a citizen who courageously strives to enforce them against the power of those who violate them" (*D*, 3, I/420). We easily forget that one of the most important duties of a Prince (and of a people, one can presume) is to always "take care not to make the rich desperate, and to satisfy the people and keep them contented" (*P*, XIX/70).

Corruption and refoundation

A state is said to be corrupted at the moment the rulers pursue their own (or their factions') interest over the common interest. A principality becomes corrupted when an ambitious citizen becomes Prince, either by hereditary succession or by usurpation. Corruption in a republic emerges through the nomination of citizens to state offices on the basis of money and power instead of merit, which leads to officeholders governing for themselves (*D*, 1, XVIII/241-2). The laws of a republic have a tendency to change under corruption (the rulers will turn them to their advantage) but its institutions remain stable (*D*, 1, XVIII/241), thus creating a gap between the institutions (including the Constitution) expressing the "first principles" of the free state and the laws now based on particular interests. The institutions so weakened become ripe targets for exploitation. They cannot on their own maintain the state; its officeholders, along with their electors, must be willing to work for the public good (D, 1, XVIII/242).

Corruption can still be fought as long as it has not spread beyond the highest levels of the state. It is possible to bring the state back to its first principles by getting rid of the injurious leaders and by reforming the unjust laws.[25] But if corruption spreads to the populace, the state is essentially lost and simply replacing the leaders will do no good. Widespread corruption stems from inequality among the people (*D*, 1, XVII/240). It is important to note at this point that corruption originates from the leaders and never from the people (Germino 1972: 66-7). A corrupt leadership often results in factions, and when these factions become large enough each citizen will be requested to pick sides and the entire state will become divided. At that point the public good is no longer a concern for anyone.[26]

A state corrupted throughout cannot be saved; it can only be replaced, or refounded, by a single all-powerful man, which will lead to either a principality or a tyranny. Refounding a corrupt state is different than the ordinary foundation of a state. Powerful interests must first be fought, and since laws and institutions no longer work properly, the only remaining method is violence, leading to a conundrum:

> (...) a good man will seldom attempt to become prince by evil methods, even though his purpose be good; on the other hand a wicked man, when he has become prince, will seldom try to do what is right, for it never will come into his mind to use rightly the authority he has gained wickedly (*D*, 1, XVIII/243).

Virtù seems to be needed more here than in a straightforward foundation, due to the added difficulty created by corruption. Consequently, the new state runs a greater risk to become a tyranny. If successful, the refounded state should be a principality. It is not suitable for a republic immediately, since a corrupted failed state has by definition a high level of inequality among its citizens.

Conclusion

We have sought to build a coherent model of Machiavelli's cycle of regimes that is as simple as possible. It took us a good deal of analysis of Machiavelli's scattered thoughts on politics to achieve that end. We can summarize the cycle the following way (see Appendix).

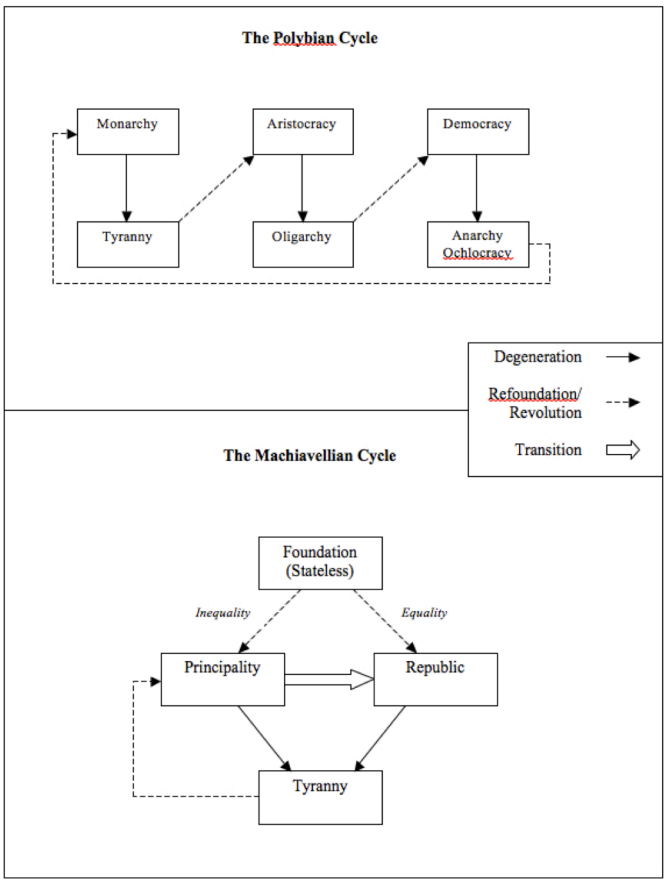
We start with three kinds of regimes, defined by their power relations between the ruler(s) of the state and the citizens. Tyranny is a degenerate, unstable form of government where the tyrant rules for himself; this type of state is extremely hard to maintain. In a principality, the Prince seeks to legitimize his power through reputation. To this end he has to be seen as endorsing the values of the people and working for the common good. The good done to the people along with the greater reliability and lesser cost of legitimate authority will make for a much more stable state. As flagrant inequalities are smoothed out in the populace, a principality can move on to become a republic, an even more stable form of government where the formal authority of the rule of law prevails.

Principalities and republics are both prone to degeneration and corruption. In all regimes, the Great and the people oppose each other, and many ambitious citizens, especially among the Great, have their eyes on the throne with the intention of using it for their own benefits. Internal conflicts take on a different shape depending on the power structure. In principalities, the conflict is personal; the Prince and the Great are pitted against each other in intrigue and violence. The institutions of a republic can prevent much of these personal confrontations, but then the locus of conflict shifts towards the exploitation of those institutions. Through the impersonal state, ambitious individuals can rise in rank and reputation, and get themselves nominated in positions of power. Republics, however, are less prone to degeneration than principalities, mainly because in the former, the people have a greater say and they have the public good at heart. This ensures that they provide the state with good laws and an impersonal judicial branch.

Corruption starts at the top, when ambitious rulers take command and govern for themselves or their faction's benefits. Corruption is inevitable; even if the regime is exceptionally good, the rarity of *virtù*, the natural forgetfulness of men and the ever-changing fortune will ensure that this situation will not last long unless the regime can periodically reinvent itself. At some point the state becomes unstable but can still be rescued through a change of leadership. If corruption is left to spread through the people, all is lost and the state must be refounded completely. The violence and radical means needed to overcome a corrupt state will lead to a tyrant, or in the best case, a Prince, and the cycle begins anew.

As we can see, Machiavelli's cycle of regime does not form a perfect circle as is the case with Polybius. Machiavelli focuses his attention on two general types of regimes, principalities and republics. Both will degenerate over time, in accord with Polybius' *anacyclosis*, but the net result is here in flux. While Polybius maintains that the succession of regimes must follow a certain order, Machiavelli only suggests tendencies. The final result will depend on more that the nature of the previous regime, it will crucially depend on sociological (egalitarian vs. non-egalitarian society), personal (the new ruler's character) and geopolitical factors. Another difference lies in the degenerative mechanisms. Polybius proposes a simple mechanism involving the passage of time and instantiated in succession and forgetfulness, that is applicable to all "good" regimes. Machiavelli applies a similar mechanism regarding principalities, but creates a whole new set of mechanisms dealing with the formal authority structure found in republics. In his discussion of the Polybian cycle, Machiavelli agrees that the "mixed constitution" is the best regime, mainly because degeneration will be much slower.[27] In the rest of his work however, he drops this language to refer directly to republics. It is clear to me that Machiavelli talks about two distinctively good regimes, and not about one "single-constitution" regime (principality) as a subset of the "mixed-constitution" republic, which allows me to consider republics as a distinct regime instead of an aggregate.

There remains a crucial element we have not incorporated in our model, an aspect of politics that takes a large space in Machiavelli's work, and that is foreign policy. We have focused our attention entirely on the internal dynamics of politics. I believe that the cycle of regimes can stand on its own as it is and provide a valuable key in understanding Machiavelli's political science. Evidently, the model would be more complete, albeit much more complicated, if we integrated war, conquest and diplomacy into the model. The obvious connection between the cycle and international politics is when a state becomes weak and unstable, it is prone to foreign intervention. Machiavelli's exhortation for a stable state is precisely to ensure that it remains *free*, i.e. independent on the international scene. I will leave these refinements to more qualified scholars to pursue.



Appendix 1. The Polybian Cycle

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Endnotes

1 Works by Machiavelli will be referenced by (*P*, book/pp) for the *Prince*, and (*D*, book, chapter/pp) for the *Discourses on Livy*. Page numbers correspond to the Gilbert translation listed in the bibliography, both in vol. 1.

2 There is an interpretation of the *Discourses* that it has been written in two parts, one before Machiavelli wrote the *Prince* and one after, and that both parts differ substantially in their approach to politics. To complicate matters, it is said that the chapters of the first part has been scattered among the second part (an hypothesis proposed by G. Sasso and F. Gilbert; see Larivaille 1982: 12 n.3). A second hypothesis concerns Machiavelli's knowledge of Book VI of Polybius, the one pertaining to the cycle of regimes. Hexter (1956) maintains that Machiavelli came across Book VI only in the second part of the Discourses. That would mean, according to Larivaille's chapter ordering of the *Discourses* (182), that the discussion on the relationship between the Great and the people would have been written in ignorance of Polybius' cycle. If this is the case, my own model could not stand, because I suppose the *Discourses* to form a single coherent text, to be read alongside the *Prince*. To my defense, I refer to Whitfield (1958), who makes a convincing case that the "two texts" hypothesis is based on weak conjectures, and that we have no particular reason to suppose Machiavelli did not know Polybius VI from the start (see also Anglo 1969: ch. 3).

3 See also Von Fritz (1954: 60-61) for a similar description. Mansfield (2001: 39) notes that for Polybius the objective of the mixed regime is justice, while for Machiavelli it is stability.

4 The most notable exceptions are when he claims that Fortune governs the actions of men, but see the discussion below.

5 Althusser (2006: 251-2) remarks that what Machiavelli presents as an anthropology is in fact political psychology. In the former, all agents share the same basic attributes (as in Hobbes); in the latter, attributes are variable and dependent on each agent's political position (prince, noble or citizen). We will interpret Machiavelli as proposing an anthropology, but one in which the *salience* of certain attributes depend on the political situation.

6 "(...) he who too much endeavors to be feared, if he exceeds the norm ever so little, gets hated" (*D*, 3, XXI/478).

7 In the *Tercets on Ambition*, Ambition and Avarice walk together (in Gilbert, vol. 2: 735). Also: "Nature gave you hands and speech, and with them she gave you also ambition and avarice, with which her bounty is cancelled" (*The Golden Ass*, VIII, in Gilbert, vol. 2: 772).

8 "But on the part of the prince, there are the majesty of his princely rank, the laws, the defensive measures of his friends and of the state -- which protect him. Hence, if to all these things is added the people's good will, it is impossible for anyone to be rash enough to conspire" (*P*, XIX/69). Another distinction between rationality and reputation: "Therefore, considering when it is easy and when it is hard to get a people to accept something, one can make this distinction: either what you are trying to persuade them of shows on its surface gain or loss; or the decision to be made seems courageous or cowardly" (*D*, 1, LIII/303).

9 Those are the martial values aforementioned, along with religious values: "(...) all mercy, all faith, all integrity, all humanity, all religion" (*P*, XVIII/66).

10 His basis is an interpretation of *The Prince*, XXIII, on the councillors: "One lies from 'fear of authority' (riverenza). Therefore

someone who asks for the truth runs 'the danger of being despised'" (Faraklas 1997: 58 n.3). But a more throughout reading of this chapter reveals that asking for truth is not sufficient for contempt, one must also (and especially) change his mind depending on advices and therefore be seen as weak and easily influenced.

11 See for example the interpretative debates in Plamenatz (1972) and Ménissier (2002). The shortest and most informative definition I've found is this one: "Between the Roman scheme (moral austerity) and the modern scheme (success at all costs), Machiavelli does not really choose" (Védrine 1972: 48).

12 Also, there is not one great destiny, but a multitude of particular destinies represented by wheels inside the palace of Fortune: "as many wheels are turning as there are varied ways of climbing to those things which every living man strives to attain" (*Tercets on Fortune*, in Gilbert, vol. 2: 746). While taking care not to exaggerate meaning here, this passage indicates that each individual has a destiny somewhat influenced by his choices.

13 Wherever the ruler comes from, the Great or the people, is largely irrelevant since he has to rise above the humors, and a ruler of either origin will have to adopt the same strategy in dealing with those humors.

14 I.e. those who show love and goodwill. We can safely drop this type of Great, as they play very little role in Machiavelli's work. This will simplify our model somewhat.

15 Galbraith defines what he calls "implicit conditioning" thusly: "The acceptance of authority, the submission to the will of others, becomes the higher preference of those submitting. (...) the submission is considered to be normal, proper, or traditionally correct" (Galbraith 1983: 24). See also Lukes (1977) and Wrong (1988).

16 On religion, see *D*, 1, XII/226-9.

17 Pretending is a rational action, while being genuinely motivated by those values is not rational but rather emotional, since the agent does not aim to maximize his utility (Author 2007). The ruler genuinely motivated by values would not survive for long in Machiavelli's world, as he could not adjust his behavior to his changing fortune.

18 Among the deeds worthy of esteem, we find first of all the defense of the state, then great works, military victories, and the recognition of excellence among citizens (*P*, XXI/81-4).

19 And in any case, "even the shrewdest observers are largely condemned to judge by appearances" (Skinner 1992: 52).

20 On Romulus and his successors: "their purpose was to found a kingdom and not a republic" (*D*, 1, II/200).

21 "These men are able to distinguish between glory and narrow ambition, between the common good and private advantage. They are the true benefactors of the human race" (Germino 1972: 71).

22 "If we are to discuss either people or prince when unrestrained, fewer defects will be seen in the people than in the prince, and they will be smaller and easier to remedy" (*D*, 1, LVIII/317), as an unfettered populace will still look to defend the public good, while a Prince will mainly be concerned with his own person.

23 For Machiavelli, ingratitude against someone who has served the state well originates either from avarice or suspicion (*sospetto*). Avarice is founded on cupidity and should be castigated; to disgrace someone by avarice constitutes "a folly that has no excuse" (*D*, 1, XXIX/257). Suspicion, on the other hand, results from rational reflection about the political menace of an individual basking in glory; it is excusable and sometimes necessary for the survival of the regime.

24 See also *D*, 1, XVI/235-8.

25 Which leads Germino (1972: 66-7) to note that corruption is not directly caused by human nature, since man has the power to stop it .

26 Lazzeri (1999: 251-2) offers an interesting alternative interpretation. For him, the people and the Great are equally prone to ambition, the difference being that only the Great hold the material and organizational resources necessary to render their ambition effective. When the state becomes corrupted, opportunities arise for the people to satisfy their own ambitions. Del Lucchese (2009) makes a similar point reading the *Florentine Histories*. But even if popular ambition is conceivable, as long as it remains dependant on circumstances created by ambitious Greats, the latter retains explanatory priority.

27 See Von Fritz (1954: 87) for this view in Polybius.