

Manfred J. Holler

Niccolò Machiavelli on Power*

Abstract:

This paper uses the concept of power to analyze Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*. This helps to distil the elements that form the Machiavelli program that has its short-term aim in the formation of a national state of Italy. A unification of Italy under the umbrella of a princely family (such as identified with Cesare Borgia) was meant to be the first stage in an evolutionary process which, in the end, could lead to a more or less stable republican system. For the latter, the Roman Republic as described in the *Discourses* is Machiavelli's model. The use of power, but also the minimization of cruelties, and the participation of the people, either in the form of militia to successfully fight foreign armies or to support the princely government, are major ingredients to this process.

1. Introduction

The Prince has no power. This is the immediate consequence of applying Weber's seminal concept of power to Machiavelli's *The Prince* as we will see below. Of course, this conclusion seems highly paradoxical since Niccolò Machiavelli has been praised and condemned as prophet of unconstrained power. It seems that there is more to power in Machiavelli's writings as common understanding and superficial interpretation suggest. In this paper I scrutinize *The Prince* and the *Discourses* with the concept of power hoping to get a deeper insight in Machiavelli's political and philosophical ideas. My expectation is that the reader will concur with what I suggest to be the Machiavellian agenda.

To bring the discussion into focus, the paper takes off with an outline of the Machiavellian agenda. *Section 3* restates the issue of power in Machiavelli's political writings. *Section 4* examines these issues using various definitions of power, using Weber's concept of power as a litmus test. Various aspects of power, such as balance of power, autonomous power, and the power of the sword, are reviewed in *Sections 5* and *6*. *Section 7* is a short summary, some challenging remarks, and my conclusions.

* The author would like to thank Matthew Braham, Leonidas Donskis and George Frankfurter for very helpful comments. There is a related paper (Holler 2008), however, the two papers discuss the dimension of power in Machiavelli from different perspectives.

2. The Machiavelli Program

The central thesis of this paper is that the Roman Republic of 16th century Italy was the target of Machiavelli's political writings envisaging a united national state. There are straightforward indicators of this in *The Prince*. In finalizing Chapter 26, Machiavelli directly addresses the governing Medici to whom he dedicates his text: "It is no marvel that none of the before-mentioned Italians have done that which it is hoped your illustrious house may do." (*The Prince*, 125) And "[m]ay your illustrious house therefore assume this task with that courage and those hopes which are inspired by a just cause, so that under its banner our fatherland may be raised up [...]" (ibid., 107).

Regardless, the unification of Italy under the umbrella of a princely family is just a first step in the Machiavelli program. As I will show below, unification is meant to be the first stage in an evolutionary process which, in the end, could lead into a more or less stable republican system.

Machiavelli dedicated the text of *The Prince* to Lorenzo the Magnificent, son of Piero di Medici.¹ This dedication has been interpreted as Machiavelli's attempt to gain the favour of one of the powerful Medici "in the hope that they might invite him back to public service" (Gauss 1952, 11). This interpretation seems to be widely accepted and probably contains some truth. In the context of Machiavelli's agenda, however, the dedication can (also) be interpreted as a second attempt of initiating the creation of a united Italy under the rule of the Medici, guaranteeing peace and order.

In a letter to his friend Francesco Guicciardini, Machiavelli suggested the Condottiere Giovanni de' Medici as the liberator of Italy.² This was years after Machiavelli saw Cesare Borgia failing in his project to conquer substantial shares of Italy and to resist the claims and the power of the vassals and followers of the French and Spanish Crown and of the German Emperor who divided Italy as spoils of war. Machiavelli maintained that, despite rather skilled precautions, Cesare Borgia was defeated by *fortuna*. It was *fortuna* which brought about the early death of Cesare Borgia's papal father Alexander VI. And again, it was *fortuna* who blinded him when he supported the election of Julius II as successor of his father. Instead of being a supporter to his ambitious projects, Julius II turned out to be a rival in the race for power.

The Machiavellian agenda becomes evident when one compares Roman history as interpreted in the *Discourses* with the facts that one learns about Cesare Borgia as selected in *The Prince*. In both cases there is an extremely cruel beginning in which the corresponding 'heroes' violate widely shared norms of

¹ Lorenzo the Magnificent is the grandson of Lorenzo di Medici who died in 1492 and entered history books as *The Magnificent*. His grandson died in 1519, too early to fulfil Machiavelli's aspirations. However, it is not evident that the 'new' Lorenzo ever read Machiavelli's text (see Gauss 1952, 11).

² Francesco Guicciardini later became the highest official at the papal court, and first commander of the Pope's army. Guicciardini remained Machiavelli's friend until the latter's death. Nevertheless, Guicciardini didn't often support Machiavelli's plans and ideas (see Zorn 1977, XXXVIIIf. and LIX).

the 'human race'. It has been argued that Machiavelli's choice of Cesare Borgia, also called the *Duke*, to become the hero of *The Prince* was a grave error from the standpoint of his later reputation. "Cesare had committed crimes on his way to power, and it might be added that he had committed other crimes too." (Gauss 1952, 12f.) It seems that Machiavelli anticipated such a critique, and consequently his claim: "Reviewing thus all the actions of the Duke, I find nothing to blame, on the contrary I feel bound, as I have done, to hold him up as an example to be imitated by all who by fortune and with the arms of others have risen to power." (*The Prince*, 57)

Here again the Machiavelli program is shining through. Whoever has the power should follow the path outlined by Cesare Borgia—and by Romulus. Concerning the status and evaluation of crimes in this agenda, Romulus, mythic founder of Rome, even killed his brother Remus in order not to share power. He also "consented to the death of Titus Tatius, who had been elected to share the royal authority with him" (*Discourses*, 120). In the interpretation of Machiavelli, these murders guaranteed that one (and only one) will defines the common good. It was the will of the prince.³

It is important to note that for Machiavelli Cesare Borgia's cruelties and Romulus's fratricide were violations of moral norms. However, as is notoriously quoted, Machiavelli accepted that the violation of moral norms can have its justification: "[...] in the action of men, and especially of princes, from which there is no appeal, the end justifies the means." (*The Prince*, 94)

The period of cruelties and 'destructive purification'⁴ was meant to be followed, in the case of both Rome and the unified Italy, by peace and order that presupposed protection from external enemies. Thus, 'destructive purification' was to the benefit of the people. In the Roman case, the giving of law by the prince was a major component to support peace and order. In a more mature state, this princely phase was followed by the division of power together with the introduction of a republican order.

In the case of Cesare Borgia, the project ended with the early death of his father, Pope Alexander VI. Cesare's powerbase became too weak to continue the project of transforming the Papal State into a Borgia State and of extending the Borgia State to entire Italy, to have enough power to keep foreign governments and armies out of the country.

In the case of Romulus and Rome, history went on to the evolution of the Roman Republic. Machiavelli gave an (efficiency) argument why, in the end, the princely government is expected to transform into a republican system as the governmental regime stabilized. In Chapter IX of the *Discourses* one reads: "[...]

³ If this will is consistent and strong enough to fight inside and outside rivals, then peace and order prevails. Relating this view to Arrow's Impossibility Theorem seems straightforward (see Arrow 1963). An implication of this theorem is that a consistent and complete ranking of social state can be guaranteed if it concurs with the preferences of a rational individual (i.e., dictator), irrespective of the preferences of other individuals in the very same society (see Holler and Marciano 2009 for a discussion).

⁴ As I have written these lines at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research at Mumbai I have to point out that 'destructive purification' is one of the characteristics of the God Shiva.

although one man alone should organize a government, yet it will not endure long if the administration of it remains on the shoulders of a single individual; it is well, then, to confide this to the charge of many, for thus it will be sustained by the many.”

As we know from history, and stated in the *Discourses*, in the case of Rome the transformation into a republic was not a peaceful event. Yet, Machiavelli's belief in Republics to be the most stable political system becomes obvious from his writings. The costs in taking political systems by force and to establish a princely power are likely to be prohibitive compared to capture of power in a principality. “[...] in republics there is greater life, greater hatred, and more desire for vengeance; they do not and cannot cast aside the memory of their ancient liberty, so that the surest way is either to lay them waste or reside in them.” (*The Prince*, 47)

Both alternatives, one should add, are perhaps not too profitable. Machiavelli has seen the Republic of Florence taken over by the Medici without experiencing much resistance after the Florence militia disintegrated in the Battle of Prato, at the hands of Spanish infantry. The fact that the Medici decided to ‘reside in it’, does however not contradict Machiavelli's theory. Contrariwise, the case illustrates that the republican spirit in Florence was not very strong. This is consistent with Machiavelli's interpretation.

Yet, there is another efficiency argument in favour of the republic: it offers a possibility to get the people involved in government. In Chapter 58 of Book I of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli gives a series of arguments why he thinks that “the people are wiser and more constant than princes” (214) if their behaviour is regulated by law. If his arguments hold, then a state that allows for the participation of the people is preferable to principalities which are dominated by a single despot, a king of divine right, or a small clique of nobles. However, the participation of the people does not exclude the possibility of the emergence of a despot and the transformation of a republic into tyranny. Machiavelli gives several examples for this possibility and the case of Rome is the most apropos. The latter demonstrates the importance of adequate laws and institutional rules to prevent individual citizens from capturing power. Machiavelli argues that if “we study carefully the conduct of the Roman republic”, we discover that “the prolongation of her military commands” was one of the two reasons “of her decadence” (*Discourses*, 387).

“For the farther the Roman armies went from Rome, the more necessary did such prolongation of the military commands seem to the Senate, and the more frequently did they practise it. Two evils resulted from this: militarization. The first was that fewer men became experienced in the command of armies, and therefore distinguished reputation was confined to a few. The other was that by the general remaining a long while in command of an army, the soldiers became so attached to him personally that they made themselves his partisans, and, forgetful of the Senate, recognized no chief or authority

but him. It was thus that Sylla and Marius were enabled to find soldiers willing to follow their lead even against the republic itself. And it was by this means that Cæsar was enabled to make himself absolute master of his country." (*Discourses*, 388)

Machiavelli was quite aware that efficiency arguments as such neither guarantee that a republic prevails nor save a republic, if it exists, from the decay into a princely state, tyranny or anarchy. On the other hand, it is reasonable to surmise that, had it become reality and matured like Rome did, Machiavelli hoped that the Borgia Italy finally would transform to a republic. It seems quite obvious from the final chapter in *The Prince* that Machiavelli wanted to talk the Medici into another attempt to accomplish the project of an all-Italian state that is strong enough to guarantee peace and order for its citizens, and to fight foreign enemies. In his *Introduction to The Prince*, Gauss (1952, 30) writes:

"Machiavelli had spent thirteen years in earnest striving to improve the lot of his country, and learned much that is revealing and valid. His reward was exile. It is idle to deny that *The Prince* is a bitter book. Its bitterness is the result of his failure in his time. The modern reader cannot afford to allow this to blind him to what it contains which is still valid for our days."

I cannot concur that *The Prince* is a bitter book. Gauss himself described it as a "handbook for aspirants to political power" (*ibid.*, 12). It seems that this political power is not self-contained, but it can be identified as part of Machiavelli's agenda to better Italy's destiny and thus "improve the lot of this country". Contrary to Gauss, this is an optimistic perspective. The handbook is meant to be a tool to develop power which is a necessary prerequisite for peace and order. Hence, given that he had no public position after the fall of Piero Soderini in 1512, it can be interpreted as an alternative way how Machiavelli could have served his country.

It could be argued that there is conflict between the progressive structure of the Machiavelli program, as outlined here, and the circular view which Machiavelli holds on history: there is growth and prosperity followed by destruction, chaos and possible reconstruction; princely government is followed by tyranny, revolution, oligarchy, again revolution, popular state, and finally the republic which in the end collapses into anarchy waiting for the prince or tyrant to reinstall order (see *Discourses*, 101).

Also, in Machiavelli's *History of Florence* one can read:

"The general course of changes that occur in states is from condition of order to one of disorder, and from the latter they pass again to one of order. For as it is not the fate of mundane affairs to remain stationary, so when they have attained their highest state of perfection, beyond which they cannot go, they of necessity decline. And thus again, when they have descended to the lowest, and by their

disorders have reached the very depth of debasement, they must of necessity rise again, inasmuch as they cannot go lower.” (*History*, 218)

Machiavelli concludes:

“Such is the circle which all republics⁵ are destined to run through. Seldom, however, do they come back to the original form of government, which results from the fact that their duration is not sufficiently long to be able to undergo these repeated changes and preserve their existence. But it may well happen that a republic lacking strength and good counsel in its difficulties becomes subject after a while to some neighbouring state, that is better organized than itself; and if such is not the case, then they will be apt to revolve indefinitely in the circle of revolutions.” (*Discourses*, 101f.)

The above quote is an indication that the ‘circle’ is no ‘law of nature’ although the image is borrowed from nature.⁶ There are substantial variations in the development of the governmental system and there are no guarantees that the circle closes again. Obviously, there is room for political action and constitutional design that has a substantial impact on the course of political affairs. For instance, Machiavelli concludes that “[...] if Rome had not prolonged the magistracies and the military commands, she might not so soon have attained the zenith of her power; but if she had been slower in her conquests, she would have also preserved her liberties the longer” (*Discourses*, 388).

Accordingly, despite his circular view of the world, Machiavelli considered political action and constitutional design highly relevant to the course of history and also to what happens today or tomorrow. However, the circular view allows us to learn from history and apply what we learned today in the future. Machiavelli repeatedly urges his contemporaries to study the Romans and to learn from them. In fact, it can be argued that Machiavelli wrote the *Discourses* to serve mainly this purpose.

In the next sections, details of Machiavelli’s agenda are clarified. The focus is on power and the status it has in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. As I will show it is not always obvious what the status of power is and how substantial power is to various agents.

⁵ The German translation is “die Regierungen aller Staaten” (Machiavelli 1977, 15), i.e. “the governments of all states”, which is perhaps more adequate than to address the republic only.

⁶ Kersting 2006, 61ff., contains arguments that imply that Machiavelli relied much stronger on the circle principle than I propose here.

3. The Issue of Power

There seems to be a perfect illustration of power in Machiavelli's *Prince*: the episode concerning how Cesare Borgia made use of his minister Messer Remirro de Orco to gain power and to please the people:

“When he [Cesare Borgia] took the Romagna, it had previously been governed by weak rulers, who had rather despoiled their subjects than governed them, and given them more cause for disunion than for union, so that the province was a prey to robbery, assaults, and every kind of disorder. He, therefore, judged it necessary to give them a good government in order to make them peaceful and obedient to his rule. For this purpose he appointed Messer Remirro de Orco, a cruel and able man, to whom he gave the fullest authority. This man, in a short time, was highly successful, whereupon the duke, not deeming such excessive authority expedient, lest it should become hateful, appointed a civil court of justice in the centre of the province under an excellent president, to which each city appointed its own advocate. And as he knew that the hardness of the past had engendered some amount of hatred, in order to purge the minds of the people and to win them over completely, he resolved to show that if any cruelty had taken place it was not by his orders, but through the harsh disposition of his minister. And having found the opportunity he had him cut in half and placed one morning in the public square at Cesena with a piece of wood and blood-stained knife by his side. The ferocity of this spectacle caused the people both satisfaction and amazement.” (*The Prince*, 55)

If one analyzes this episode with respect to power one can interpret Cesare Borgia's behaviour as a successful solution of a strategic (game theoretical) problem: how to bring order to the Romagna, unite it, and reduce it to peace and fealty, without being made responsible for the necessary cruelties, and thus the creation of hate. Machiavelli claims that cruelty was necessary, or at least, in modern parlance, a socially efficient solution (*The Prince*, 50). It is worth noting that it is the combination of cruelty with legal procedures that helps to transform cruelty into a common good.

The episode demonstrates that the power of Cesare Borgia depended on his skills of strategic thinking and, one must admit, on the naivety of his minister. Messer Remirro de Orco could have concluded that the *Duke* will exploit his capacity; and in the very end this capacity included that he had to serve as a sacrifice to the people who *had* to suffer cruelties to *enjoy* the fruits of a strong government and order. Perhaps Messer Remirro de Orco saw himself and the *Duke* in a different context and the game that reflected this context did not propose the trial and his death as an optimal alternative to the *Duke*.⁷ Obviously,

⁷ Seen in isolation, the *Duke's* offering of Messer Remirro de Orco, although a successful move was

the misfortune of Messer Remirro de Orco was that the *Duke's* game was based on the offering of an 'officer' to the consolation of the people. It seems that the *Duke* was quite aware that the love of the people may prevent conspiracies from within and serve as a rampart to outside competitors, or in fact serve in both roles, as Machiavelli suggests (see, e.g., *The Prince*, 96 and 108).⁸

If the interpretation of Messer Remirro de Orco's misfortune is valid here then one must conclude that the power of the Duke is highly dependent on historical circumstances, political constraints and his strategic skills. In fact, Max Weber's definition of power allows one to judge that he had no power at all since he was not in a position "to carry out his own will despite resistance".⁹ On the other hand, Cesare Borgia was a master to circumvent resistance and, finally, to achieve most of his goals, however cruel his means were. For instance, as Cesare Borgia feared that a successor to Pope Alexander VI might seek to take away from him what he had gained under his father's papal rule, he destroyed "all who were of blood of those ruling families which he had despoiled, in order to deprive the pope of any opportunity" (*The Prince*, 56). This example demonstrates that Borgia did not accept a given resistance as constraint to his power, but would try to overcome it.

In Machiavelli's *Discourses*, power of the Roman Republic derives from (a) the recognized duty of the citizens concerning the common good, (b) the law which specifies the duty, and (c) political institutions that implement the duty in accordance to the law and revise the law in accordance to the duty. Power is an essential element of a republic. Free states are those "which are far from all external servitude and are able to govern themselves according to their own will".¹⁰ A strong military organization is the indispensable pillar. Only if it exists, citizens can hope "to live without fear that their patrimony will be taken away from them, knowing not merely that they are born as free citizens and not as slaves, but that they can hope to rise by their abilities to become leaders of their communities".¹¹

This statement links the individual freedom of not being a slave and the external freedom of the community, the free state, and to participating in the shaping of the political actions of this community, i.e., the potential to play an active and effective role in political life. However, Machiavelli points out that free citizens are generally reluctant to serve the common good and prefer to

not even part of a subgame perfect equilibrium of this game as it presupposed a non-rational behaviour of the second player. Messer Remirro de Orco should have considered that Cesare Borgia could be tempted to use him as a scapegoat.

⁸ Game theoretic thinking seems apropos here. Strategic thinking is a dominant feature in Machiavelli's writings and the thinking of his 'agents'. Machiavelli, thus, could well be considered as a pioneer of modern game theory. It does not come as a surprise that the language of this theory straightforwardly applies to the core of Machiavelli's analysis (for a game-theoretical interpretation of power in Machiavelli's work, see Holler 2008).

⁹ For Max Weber's definition of power, see section 3 below.

¹⁰ I.ii., 129, of Machiavelli 1960, *Il Principe e Discorsi*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milan Feltrinelli), translated by Q. Skinner. See Skinner 1984, 239.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II.ii., 284 (see Skinner 1984, 240).

pursue their own immediate advantage. In game theoretical terms: free-riding is a dominant strategy. That is where the law and political institutions step in to overcome this dilemma. “It is the hunger of poverty that makes men industries and it is the laws that make them good.”¹²

The law, however, could be corrupted by the biased interests of various groups or by prominent members of the community. This problem is solved, by-and-large through adequate political (and/or religious) institutions. Skinner (1984, 246) summarizes Machiavelli’s description of the law making institutions of the Republic as follows:

“[...] under their republican constitution”, the Romans “[...] had one assembly controlled by the nobility, another by the common people, with the consent of each being required for any proposal to become law. Each group admittedly tended to produce proposals designed merely to further its own interests. But each was prevented by the other from imposing its own interests as laws. The result was that only such proposals as favoured no faction could ever hope to succeed. The laws relating to the constitution thus served to ensure that the common good was promoted at all times.”¹³

The common good seems to be identifiable with a compromise between the two major political agents. The installation of the *decemviri* (from 451 to 449 BC), discussed in more detail below, is just one case that demonstrates the fragility of the compromise on which the Roman Republic was built.

4. On Power

Machiavelli is often seen as a predecessor of Thomas Hobbes.¹⁴ Obviously, their views on human nature and the function of the authority of the state have much in common. To some extent they also share the fate that their writings were not highly appreciated for quite some time and even today they meet with strong reservations. As Machiavelli, neither in *The Prince* nor the *Discourses*, offers any explicit definition of power, it seems to be right to start to analyze the state of power in Machiavelli’s work with a reference to Hobbes’ famous opening sentence of Chapter 10 of the *Leviathan*: “[t]he power of a man is his present means, to obtain some future apparent good [...]” (Hobbes [1651]1991, 62)

¹² Ibid., I.iii., 136 (see Skinner 1984, 244).

¹³ This is how Skinner (1984, 246) summarizes Machiavelli’s description of the law making institutions of the Republic.

¹⁴ Zorn (1977, LXVI) argues that Machiavelli is of much higher importance than his “vielüberschätzter Schüler Hobbes” (i.e. his “overvalued pupil Hobbes”). To both, without the supremacy of the power of the state, “life is brutish, cruel and short”. Hobbes seems to prefer monarchy, while Machiavelli is in favour of the republic. However, in Machiavelli the form of government is not a matter of choice but the result of an evolutionary process. In this circular process, tyranny and anarchism have their necessary functions.

Hobbes does not restrict himself to choices of social interaction. Power in Hobbsian theory is a far broader concept than social power. But, if we think of power in terms of chances to affect results, social power is a special case. It is unclear, though, whether power should be restricted to obtain some future apparent 'good'. If so, then Hobbes' definition links the concept of power to preferences of an actor.

Perhaps power should rather be conceived as any ability to intervene into the course of the world, regardless of the preferences we espouse with respect to results of action. Quite a bit depends here on how one interprets the term 'apparent' and how one specifies the very concept of preference. It seems that the application of Hobbes' concept of power raises more questions than it allows one to find answers, though it might come the closest to the spirit that fuels Machiavelli's work. However, Machiavelli talked about power only in the political or social context. He was not interested in (nonhuman) nature unless it was related to 'man'. For instance, Machiavelli (*The Prince*, 82) maintains that the prince must "learn the nature of the land, how steep the mountains are, how the valley debouch, where the plains lie, and understand the nature of rivers and swamps" so that one can "better see how to defend it".

Weber's concept of social power seems to be a straightforward restriction of the Hobbesian concept of power (as a potential) to social contexts.¹⁵ It says: "Macht bedeutet die Chance, innerhalb einer sozialen Beziehung den eigenen Willen auch gegen Widerstreben durchzusetzen, gleichviel worauf diese Chance beruht." (Weber [1922]2005, 38) Notwithstanding the very plausible interpretation of the Weberian "Chance" as meaning 'chance', Talcott Parsons translated this famous passage as: "the *probability* that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance." (Weber 1947, 152, italics added) However, in *Essays from Max Weber*, edited by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, we read: "In general, we understand by 'power' the *chance* of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action." (italics added) This is the translation of Weber's definition given on page 678 of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Weber [1922]2005, 678).¹⁶

Given this definition, the dilemma of fear and love which is implicit in Machiavelli's writings becomes obvious. As I have shown, Machiavelli argues that the love of the people may prevent conspiracies from within and serves as a rampart to outside competitors. However, a prince who makes use of this potential is dependent on the people. His range of goals which he can achieve "despite resistance" will be small if he has to be afraid to lose the support of the people and

¹⁵ The Hobbes-Weber comparison of power is discussed in a work in progress by Holler et al. 2006.

¹⁶ The possibility notwithstanding that Parsons simply misunderstood the Weberian concept, or committed some blunder in translation due to negligence, there seems to be a deeper issue here concerning the very nature of power itself: An outside observer of social interaction could in her account of power indeed try to rely exclusively on the probability that certain results will be brought about rather than on the potential to bring them about. But this 'probability' interpretation will not do justice to the notion of her own power an actor would endorse herself (see Holler and Nurmi 2008).

perhaps even provoke resistance. It seems that Machiavelli himself was aware of this dilemma when he raised the question “whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved” (*The Prince*, 90). His answer is: “I conclude, however, with regard to being feared and loved, that men love at their own free will, but fear at the will of the prince, and that a wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not what is in the power of others, and he must only contrive to avoid incurring hatred, as has been explained.” (*The Prince*, 91) This conclusion fits well with the concept of power proposed by Weber but neglects the strategic advantages that the prince can derive if he succeeds to be loved by the people at a not too high price, or by the sacrifice of dispensable companions like Messer Remirro de Orco.

The conflict between a favourable dependency and the autonomy of power characterizes Machiavelli’s work. This is a consequence of the strategic thinking which he excessively proposes to the heroes of his writings. If you put yourself into the shoes of others, you become dependent on what they think and what you expect them to do, at least if you do not have a dominant strategy in your quiver. However, strategic thinking could enlarge your set of possibly successful actions.

Reputation is a possible consequence of strategic thinking. The reputation qualities of the prince are the expectations of those who put themselves into the shoes of the prince. It is straightforward that a ‘good reputation’ is a means for successful government. The *Discourses* are filled with numerous examples. However, reputation can also be used to mislead people and to exploit them when necessary. Machiavelli points out that for a prince “[...] it is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, sincere, religious, and also to be so; but you must have in mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise you may be able to change to the opposite qualities” (*The Prince*, 93). Not surprisingly Machiavelli concludes that it “[...] is not, therefore necessary for a prince to have all the above-mentioned qualities, but it is very necessary to seem to have them. I would even be bold to say that to possess them and always to observe them is dangerous, but to appear to possess them is useful.” (*The Prince*, 93)

Sentences like this, although largely supported by empirical evidence, are the source of Machiavelli’s ‘bad reputation’ over the centuries, especially, of course, with those who had princely power (like Fredric II of Prussia who has written *Anti-Machiavelli* in his younger years) or served princely power (like William Shakespeare). However, Machiavelli does not limit the discussion of power to tyrants, princes, and kings. He also discusses the ‘chances’ of an individual in the republic:

“[...] the Roman republic, after the plebeians became entitled to the consulate, admitted all its citizens to this dignity without distinction of age or birth. In truth, age never formed a necessary qualification for public office; merit was the only consideration, whether found in young or old men. [...] As regards birth, that point was conceded from necessity, and the same necessity that existed in Rome will be

felt in every republic that aims to achieve the same success as Rome; for men cannot be made to bear labour and privations without the inducement of a corresponding reward, nor can they be deprived of such hope of reward without danger." (*Discourse*, 221)

Again, one finds a strong efficiency argument. In principle, though, individual power in the Roman Republic has its source in much the same circumstances as the power of the *Duke* in Renaissance Italy, however constrained by law and political institutions that are to implement the common good. Yet, if these constraints do not work the results are quite similar. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the founding of Rome follows a pattern that could be designed by Cesare Borgia. As already mentioned, Romulus "should first have killed his brother, and then have consented to the death of Titus Tatius, who had been elected to share the royal authority with him" (*Discourses*, 120). Machiavelli admits that "from which it might be concluded that the citizens, according to the example of their prince, might, from ambition and the desire to rule, destroy those who attempt to oppose their authority" (*Discourses*, 120). However,

"[...] this opinion would be correct, if we do not take into consideration the object which Romulus had in view in committing that homicide. But we must assume as a general rule that it never or rarely happens that a republic or monarchy is well constituted, or its old institutions entirely reformed, unless it is done by only one individual; it is ever necessary that he whose mind has conceived such a constitution should be alone in carrying it into effect. A sagacious legislator of a republic, therefore, whose object is to promote the public good, and not his private interests, and who prefers his country to his own successors, should concentrate all authority in himself; and a wise mind will never censure any one for having employed any extraordinary means for the purpose of establishing a kingdom or constituting a republic." (*Discourses*, 120)

This sounds like a blueprint and a justification for the cruelties initiated or committed by the Duke. We should not forget that both the stories of Cesare Borgia and Romulus were told by the same author. It seems however that Romulus was more straightforward and less constrained in his use of force than the *Duke* who was by-and-large limited to the use of 'strategic power'. But the *Duke* is a historical case while Romulus is a part of founding myths of Rome.

Notoriously, superficially and slanderously as well, Machiavelli's contribution is often summarized by his view that the justification for the use of power, however cruel, derives from its ends. In the case of Romulus, Machiavelli concludes: "It is well that, when the act accuses him, the result should excuse him; and when the result is good, as in the case of Romulus, it will always absolve him from blame. For he is to be reprehended who commits violence for the purpose of destroying, and not he who employs it for beneficent purposes." (*Discourses*, 120f.)

Except there is no guarantee that the will of the founding hero to do the public good carries over to the successor. The creation of an appropriate law is one way to implement the pursuance of the public good. Consequently, Machiavelli proposes that the “lawgiver should [...] be sufficiently wise and virtuous not to leave this authority which he has assumed either to his heirs or to any one else; for mankind, being more prone to evil than to good, his successor might employ for evil purposes the power which he had used only for good ends” (*Discourses*, 121). A successor might use his power to destroy the edifice which he created to assure his glory.

The strive and zeal for glory is Machiavelli’s answer to the question “why somebody should be willing to incur the costs of organizing the social games—in particular those of the cooperative variety” (Kliemt 1990, 72). It is the solution to the Hobbesian problem of social order.¹⁷

5. The Balance of Power

An alternative or complementary device to implement the pursuance of the public good is the *division of power* and the subsequent cooperation of the various stakeholders:

“[...] although one man alone should organize a government, yet it will not endure long if the administration of it remains on the shoulders of a single individual; it is well, then, to confide this to the charge of many, for thus it will be sustained by the many. Therefore, as the organization of anything cannot be made by many, because the divergence of their opinions hinders them from agreeing as to what is best, yet, when once they do understand it, they will not readily agree to abandon it. That Romulus deserves to be excused for the death of his brother and that of his associate, and that what he had done was for the general good, and not for the gratification of his own ambition, is proved by the fact that he immediately instituted a Senate with which to consult, and according to the opinions of which he might form his resolutions. And on carefully considering the authority which Romulus reserved for himself, we see that all he kept was the command of the army in case of war, and the power of convoking the Senate.” (*Discourses*, 121)

This quote demonstrates the implementation of power relations via institutions such as the law and the division of power. Basically, these institutions constrain individual decision making and determine the freedom of choice. Under these constraints, the participation of various groups in lawmaking and political decision making ends up either in competition and possible conflict, or in bargaining

¹⁷ See Kliemt 2009, 46ff., for a discussion of the Hobbesian roots of rational choice and the problem of social order.

and consent. Obviously, Machiavelli was far ahead of his time in his support of balance of power. His point of departure is the empirical observation and theoretical insight that

“[...] all kinds of government are defective; those three which we have qualified as good because they are too short-lived, and the three bad ones because of their inherent viciousness. Thus sagacious legislators, knowing the vices of each of these systems of government by themselves, have chosen one that should partake of all of them, judging that to be the most stable and solid. In fact, when there is combined under the same constitution a prince, a nobility, and the power of the people, then these three powers will watch and keep each other reciprocally in check.” (*Discourses*, 101)

The Roman Republic has all three elements: nobility and people as its natural components and the princely positions of consuls, tribunes and, in case of a crisis, dictators that derive from its natural components through bargaining, voting, deliberation and other procedures of collective decision making. However, this balance of power did not always work. In the end, the Roman Republic was the prey of despots the like of Marius, Sulla and, finally, Julius Cesar, although even before those the balance of power was under attack in the Roman Republic. For instance, in Chapter 40 of Book I of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli tells us the story of the Decemvir Appius who gained the power to act as a despot.

In 451 BC, the *Decemviri* were established as a result of a severe conflict between the people and the nobility. More and more the people were inclined to think that the ongoing wars with Rome's neighbours were a plot by the nobility to discipline and suppress them. As consuls were the head of the various armies the people started to hate this institution. According to Machiavelli, the people hated the title of consul more than the power which derives from this position. The election of tribunes with the function of consuls seemed to be a way out of the dilemma, but this solution was unacceptable to the nobility. After some time the institution and name of consul was re-established and the conflict became more sincere than ever. A new constitution seemed to be the only way to solve this conflict, but there was no institution that was authorized and considered as sufficiently neutral to accomplish the necessary reform.

“After many contentions between the people and the nobles respecting the adoption of new laws in Rome, by which the liberty of the state should be firmly established, it was agreed to send Spurius Posthumus with two other citizens to Athens for copies of the laws which Solon had given to that city, so that they might model the new Roman laws upon those. After their return to Rome a commission had to be appointed for the examination and preparation of the new laws, and for this purpose ten citizens were chosen for one year, amongst who was Appius Claudius, a sagacious but turbulent man. And in order that these might make such laws irrespective of any

other authority, they suppressed all the other magistracies in Rome, and particularly the Tribunes and the Consuls; the appeal to the people was also suppressed, so that this new magistracy of ten became absolute masters of Rome.” (*Discourses*, 182)

The *Decemviri* had despotic power and Appius Claudius was most prominent member of the Ten. When the Sabines and the Volscians declared war on Rome, two armies under the command of several *Decemviri* left the city. Appius, however, remained in order to govern the city.

“It was then that he (Appius) became enamoured of Virginia, and on his attempting to carry her off by force, her father Virginius killed her to save her from her ravisher. This provoked violent disturbances in Rome and in the army, who, having been joined by the people of Rome, marched to the Mons Sacer, where they remained until the Decemvirs abdicated their magistracy, and the Consuls and Tribunes were re-established, and Rome was restored to its ancient liberty and form of government.” (*Discourses*, 184f.)

In his analysis of this historical event, Machiavelli argues that

“[...] here we must note that the necessity of creating the tyranny of the Decemvirs in Rome arose from the same causes that generally produce tyrannies in cities; that is to say, the too great desire of the people to be free, and the equally too great desire of the nobles to dominate. And if the two parties do not agree to secure liberty by law, and either the one or the other throws all its influence in favour of one man, then a tyranny is the natural result. The people and the nobles of Rome agreed to create the Decemvirs, and to endow them with such great powers, from the desire which the one party had to destroy the consular office, and the other that of the Tribunes.” (*Discourses*, 185)

As a consequence the balance of power, on which the functioning of the Republic was built, was destroyed. Tyranny was not a necessary result of an evolutionary process, but the consequences of political errors. It seems obvious that Machiavelli discusses the case of Appius to show to future generations the consequences of these errors and to teach them what has to be avoided in order to protect their freedom.

“Both the Senate and the people of Rome committed the greatest errors in the creation of the Decemvirate; and although we have maintained, in speaking of the Dictator, that only self-constituted authorities, and never those created by the people, are dangerous to liberty, yet when the people do create a magistracy, they should do it in such a way that the magistrates should have some hesitation

before they abuse their powers. But the people of Rome, instead of establishing checks to prevent the Decemvirs from employing their authority for evil, removed all control, and made the Ten the only magistracy in Rome; abrogating all the others, because of the excessive eagerness of the Senate to get rid of the Tribunes, and that of the people to destroy the consulate. This blinded them so that both contributed to provoke the disorders that resulted from the Decemvirate." (*Discourses*, 186f.)

6. Autonomous Power

The Weberian definition of power is based on the degree of autonomy of the decision maker. According to this perspective the more dependent the decision maker is on the support of others, the smaller is his degree of power. This also applies to an agent who has the strategic capacity to manipulate his social environment in order to reduce or eliminate resistance, as Cesare Borgia did, so that he can have his will. It seems that in Renaissance Italy autonomous power of any substance can only be enjoyed under the strong umbrella of the church. Ecclesiastical principalities

"[...] are acquired either by ability or by fortune; but are maintained without either, for they are sustained by ancient religious customs, which are so powerful and of such a quality, that they keep their princes in power in whatever manner they proceed and live. These princes alone have states without defending them, have subjects without governing them, and their states, not being defended, are not taken from them; their subjects not being governed do not resent it, and neither think nor are capable of alienating themselves from them. Only these principalities, therefore, are secure and happy." (*The Prince*, 69)

Over a substantial period, the Popes and their Kingdom of Rome also benefited from 'old religious customs'. Yet, the spirit of the Renaissance not only inspired secular princes and their competitors but also the persons in the succession of Saint Peter. Sixtus IV (1471–1484) is said to have strongly supported the venture to murder Lorenzo Magnifico and his brother Giuliano when the two attended a mass at the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiori. Lorenzo escaped wounded but his brother was stabbed in the heart. Almost ironically, although not a reparation, a natural son of Giuliano became a papal successor of Sixtus IV by the name of Clement VII.

Before Clement VII took office, there were other rather worldly Renaissance popes. Alexander VI's "object was to aggrandise not the Church but the duke" (*The Prince*, 70) as Cesare Borgia was his son. Much what can be said about the actions of the *Duke* can therefore also be related to his father. However, under

the umbrella of 'old religious customs' the Pope seemed to demonstrate special qualities of strategic behaviour. Machiavelli reports that he "did nothing else but deceive men, he thought of nothing else, and found the occasion for it; no man was ever more able to give assurance, or affirmed things with strong oaths, and no man observed them less; however, he always succeeded in his deceptions, as he well knew this aspects of things." (*The Prince*, 93)

As successful and exploitive this policy was, it is questionable whether it could be called 'autonomous' as it largely depended on the trust the Pope enjoyed by those with whom he interacted. Deceptive behaviour is strategic because it presupposes that a player puts himself into the shoes of the other. However, the fact that the Pope was not weakened by his deceptive behaviour in his potential to deceive others, demonstrates some autonomy, probably because of his papal position.

The papal position, the historical conditions, and his martial personality, seemed to allow Julius II to act "impetuously in everything he did [...] that he always obtained a good result" (*The Prince*, 122). In the first war that Julius II waged against Messer Giovanni Bentivogli's Bologna he "achieved what no other pontiff with the utmost prudence would have succeeded in doing, because, if he had waited till all arrangements had been made and everything settled before leaving Rome, as any other pontiff would have done, it would never have succeeded" (*The Prince*, 122). It appears that Julius II seemed to play his game, irrespective of what other players thought or did; he acted autonomously. He was successful because the circumstances were in his favour, and not because his capacity was unconstrained by any means. "[...] had time followed in which it was necessary to act with caution, his ruin would have resulted, for he would never have deviated from these methods to which his nature disposed him." (*The Prince*, 122)

It is obvious from Machiavelli's writings that he did not think highly of ecclesiastical principalities and the papal state. The latter he saw as a major barrier to the unification of Italy. Part of Machiavelli's dissatisfaction with these particular entities has to do with their lack of sensitivity to the political needs and demands of the citizens and the neighbouring states, i.e., the autonomy of their power.

7. Conclusions

In this paper, it was not argued that the *Discourses* present a model for a community where one sees virtue and virtuous lawgivers that guarantee peace and order—and protection from outside enemies. This is the standard interpretation. I suggest that the *Discourses* are a model of the political process that Machiavelli hopes for and tries to initiate by his writing to see a united Italy, strong enough to fight its outside enemies. It has been argued that Cesare Borgia was the wrong hero to choose. However, there was no better alternative in his time to highlight the envisioned political development. The like of Romulus were far

and few. In fact, there is a very close similarity between Romulus and Cesare Borgia when it comes to the use of power and how they acquired it. But fortuna was with the former and not with the latter. I have conjectured that *The Prince* was meant to bring the Medici to the forefront to accomplish this project.

It is interesting to note that Machiavelli does not expect a collective to be strong and well-organized enough to bring about a united Italy or powerful Rome. He repeatedly argues that it needs a single will (and fortuna) to create a powerful entity that can successfully resist outside enemies and provide peace and order. By-and-large collectives play a rather passive role. They can support the prince or fight him. In Chapter 40 of Book I of the *Discourses* Machiavelli maintains that “those tyrants who have the masses for friends and the nobles for enemies are more secure in the possession of their power, because their despotism is sustained by a greater force than that of those who have the people for their enemies and the nobles for their friends” (186).

In the Roman Republic, the people seemed to have more power. They succeeded to install the tribunes and to reduce the position of the consuls. In the case of the Decemvir Appius the people even exerted immediate power. However, throughout Machiavelli’s writings the people have no face and no name; rather they have the form of ‘masses’ as in preceding quotation. Nothing is said how collectives organize themselves and how they exert power if not by marching to the Mons Sacer.

If one thinks that this is a shortcoming for someone considered to be the father of modern political science, then I must stress that by assuming strategic reasoning for the political agents and the deductive method of explanation Machiavelli was way ahead of his time. Many political scientists are still hesitant towards the application of game theory to political problems, and deductive arguments are still considered a *Glasperlenspiel* by many in the profession. The very same people often complain about the scientific imperialism of the economists who indeed share Machiavelli’s way of thinking, but not necessarily the subject.

The structural interpretation of the question “whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved” (*The Prince*, 90) is familiar to economists, but, until recently, its subject could not be found in textbooks or mainstream journals of economics. During the last decade, however, research about happiness became popular in economics and love and fear are considered in this context. Even more frequently economists speak about ends and means, but they hardly ever discuss the ends. In economics, the question whether “the ends justify the means” (*The Prince*, 94) is not a question to be answered.

To conclude, Machiavelli was not an economist, and many political scientists are quite hesitant to see him as a forerunner of political science. Was he, then, a philosopher? Perhaps the following quote from the Fifth Book, Chapter I of his *History of Florence* may help to answer this question.

“[...] when brave and well-disciplined armies have achieved victory, and victory has produced peace, the vigour of warlike spirits cannot

be enervated by more honourable indulgence than that of letters; nor can idleness enter any well-regulated communities under a more alluring and dangerous guise. This was perfectly well understood by Cato when the philosophers Diogenes and Carnedes were sent as ambassadors from Athens to the Senate of Rome; for when he saw the Roman youth begin to follow them with admiration, Cato, well knowing the evil that would result to the country from this excusable idleness, ordered that no philosopher should thenceforth be received in Rome." (*History*, 218)

References

- Arrow, K. J. (1963), *Social Choice and Individual Value*, New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Gauss, C. (1952), "Introduction to the Mentor Edition", in N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, New York: Mentor Books.
- Hobbes, T. ([1651]1991), *Leviathan*, ed. by R. Tuck, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holler, M. J. (2008), "Machiavelli: Der Versuch einer spieltheoretischen Analyse von Macht", in: M. Held, G. Kubon-Gilke and R. Sturm (eds.), *Macht in der Ökonomie. Jahrbuch Normative und institutionelle Grundfragen der Ökonomik*, Band 7, Marburg: Metropolis, 77–95.
- , H. Kliemt and H. Nurmi (2006), "Actions and Acts in Game and Decision Theoretic Accounts of Power", unfinished manuscript.
- and A. Marciano (2009), "Machiavelli's Possibility Theorem", submitted paper.
- and H. Nurmi (2009), "Measurement of Power, Probabilities, and Alternative Models of Man", *Quality and Quantity*, in print.
- Kliemt, H. (1990), *Papers on Buchanan and Related Subjects*, Munich: Accedo Verlag.
- (2009), *Philosophy and Economics I*, Munich: Oldenbourg.
- Kersting, W. (2006), *Niccolò Machiavelli*, 3rd ed., Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck.
- Machiavelli, N. (1952), *The Prince*, New York: Mentor Books (quoted as *The Prince*).
- (1882), "Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius", in: *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, translated from the Italian by Ch. E. Detmold, in Four Volumes, Boston: James R. Osgood and Co. (quoted as *Discourses*).
- (1882), "History of Florence", in: *The Historical, Political, and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*, translated from the Italian by Ch. E. Detmold, in Four Volumes, Boston: James R. Osgood and Co. (quoted as *History*).
- (1977), *Discorsi. Gedanken über Politik und Staatsauffassung*, translated and edited by R. Zorn, 2nd ed., Stuttgart: Alfred Kroener Verlag.
- Skinner, Q. (1984), "The Paradoxes of Political Liberty", The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at Harvard University, October 24 and 25.

- Weber, M. (1947), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, edited by T. Parsons, New York: Free Press.
- ([1924]1948), “Class, Status and Party”, in: H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *Essays from Max Weber*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- ([1922]2005), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, Zweitausendeins: Frankfurt am Main.
- Zorn, R. (1977), “Einleitung zu N. Machiavelli”, in: N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi. Gedanken über Politik und Staatsauffassung*, 2nd ed., Stuttgart: Alfred Kroener Verlag.