

# MACHIAVELLI ON RELATIONSHIPS: KNOWLEDGE OF THE OCCASION<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to describe the way in which Machiavelli develops the idea of knowledge of the opportunity or occasion. I will try to substantiate the idea, first by showing the shocks resulting from the clash of temporalities within it; secondly by addressing two related issues, the question of ‘forcing belief’ and the classic argument of the new prince giving form to matter; and thirdly, by widening my scope and making Machiavelli a philosopher of relationships.

## **Knowing the occasion**

In chapter 6 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli says that founders of states or communities like Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus received nothing from Fortune except the occasion or opportunity that gave them the matter or substance to imbue with a form: ‘la occasione, la quale dette loro materia a potere introdurvi dentro quella forma’.<sup>2</sup> Without this encounter between opportunity and *virtù*, the first would have been in vain and the second would have languished. This means that the fortune of a founder and the opportunities that he encounters essentially consist of disorder and hardship that are, however, suitable for putting into order: as I will point out later, this is particularly clear in *Discorsi* 1:2. Occasion, fortune and *virtù* draw their respective meanings solely from their relations with each other: none of them can have substantive value without the other two. This tense relationship between occasion, fortune and *virtù* rules out both historical determinism and determinism of will, or even a harmonization of the two through the idea of a constant willingness or acceptance of what happens or of a simple versatility as defended by Pontano in his *De prudentia* (1496).

As Machiavelli points out in the same chapter of *The Prince*, this encounter of fortune and *virtù* produces nothing less than a specific kind of knowledge. The excellent *virtù* of these founders makes it possible for the opportunity to be met or, more literally, to be known: ‘la eccelente virtù loro fece quella occasione essere *conosciuta*’ (italics mine).<sup>3</sup> I propose to strictly respect the terms of this remark: identifying an opportunity in this way constitutes a genuine act of knowledge, understood as experience that affords a representation of reality. Such knowledge has the nature of an encounter, just as we can claim we have ‘known’ a hardship, or ‘known’ a woman or a man through sexual intercourse. It would be an interesting exercise to give such experience a more general validity by endowing it with cognitive consistency.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I recapitulate and develop arguments already presented in Thomas Berns, ‘Prophetic Efficacy: the Relationship between Arms and Orders’, *International Conference Machiavelli’s The Prince : Five Centuries of History, Conflict and Politics*, ed. Brill, 2015, p. 230-45.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prince*, ch.6. Machiavelli’s Italian texts are cited from Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Florence: Sansoni, 1971). The translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

We can consider other instances of such appeal to the register of knowledge, deriving from a specific encounter or experience rather than from a general exercise of reason. In *The Art of War* Book 7, Machiavelli proposes a few ‘general rules’ for the practice of war, specifying that we must ‘sapere nella guerra conoscere l’occasione e pigliarla’:<sup>4</sup> in war, we must have the skill or ability (*sapere*) to know (*conoscere*) the opportunity and to seize it (*pigliarla*). The distinction between *sapere* and *conoscere*, and the fact that the latter is not equivalent to seizing (*pigliare*) the opportunity, clearly testifies that we are dealing with a cognitive experience.

We may interpret in the same way a passage in the *Capitolo dell’ Occasione* where, following an epigram by Ausonius, opportunity is said to be ‘known by few’ (‘a pochi nota’): she turns, runs, slinks away, so that ‘one does not [re]cognize (*conosca*) me when I pass by’, ‘non mi conosca quando io vengo’.<sup>5</sup> Given man’s incapacity to know or to recognize her, opportunity is apprehended only in a context of regret, from the repentance (*Penitenzia*) of those who have let her pass them by: for he who lets the occasion pass by is, above all, the very one who doubts or questions it and, ‘occupied by many futile thoughts’ (that is to say, wasting time in weighing the opportunity), ends up by letting it flee. In short, we let the opportunity slip away just when we might hope to master it through our knowledge, to plan or determine the terms of the encounter.<sup>6</sup> Encounters with opportunity necessarily depend on a different kind of knowledge: opportunity is truly apprehended only after it has been seized.

### **The clash of temporalities**

In Machiavelli’s work, especially in *The Prince*, knowledge of the occasion is always expressed as a bringing together of multiple temporalities, with the resultant shock or impact. Needless to say, seizing the opportunity calls for speed, excess, audacity and cruelty: that is why, in *The Prince* ch.25, Machiavelli says that Fortune loves young people, who are more fierce and audacious in commanding her. Here Machiavelli departs radically from the Aristotelian vocabulary of the right measure, the middle way, lukewarmness, balance and prudence. Even his praise of youth is opposed to the Aristotelian vocabulary of middle age.

The seized occasion is revealed as entirely necessary in terms of the resulting history and the new order generated thereby; for it would surely be wrong to consider knowledge of the opportunity as temporally limited to the moment of its seizure, however essential the latter might be. In Chapter 6 of the *Prince*, this seizing of opportunity is expressed exclusively in the past tense: it *was* necessary, it *was* required, it *was* fitting (‘era necessario’, ‘bisognava’, ‘conveniva’...). Machiavelli uses such words to describe each encounter of a founding figure with a specific reality – a reality that is not obviously favourable but rather full of hardship and obstacles, yet apt for ordering. The essential conditions for seizing an opportunity cannot be expressed in the present tense, as a general rule. They can only be expressed by the effects which appear to be inherent to the concerned encounter or relationship.

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<sup>4</sup> *Tutte le opere* 385.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 987.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Occupato da molti pensier vani’ ; *ibid.*

If opportunity presents itself as slinking by, resisting a certain type of rational mastery, if regret is a constitutive albeit negative concomitant of its being, and if the truth of the encounter can only be expressed in the past tense after its outcome is determined, it is because that determinate necessity only comes into operation later. Opportunity is only *known* when order, as form entering into matter at the moment of their encounter, is prolonged and confirmed: only then does it appear to be an effective order, towards which that encounter and all results thereof were necessarily striving. Only then does an apparently adverse situation reveal itself as a fit convergence of circumstances, providing an opportunity for the *virtù* of the founder to find expression.

The clash of temporalities is particularly visible in the early chapters of the *Discorsi* in the context of Roman history. Machiavelli truly confronts the originary moment of Roman history in *Discorsi* 1:9, plainly legitimizing<sup>7</sup> the fratricidal violence of the founder of Rome. Earlier, in *Discorsi* 1:2, he had evoked this origin in a negative way, as incomplete and not perfect. On the contrary, the origin of the fortunate city of Sparta is entirely defined by the *logos* of its good legislator (the *logos* of Lycurgus, as Polybius puts it), leading on to a political history that can only be understood as the preservation of this *logos*, the conservation of a perfect and rational rule. By contrast, the violent and imperfect origin of the Roman *civitas* means that its outcome is always ‘deferred’, and that at two levels. It is deferred in respect of the structure of Machiavelli’s discourse: he starts by outlining the intrinsically indeterminate institutions of Rome, born of its conflict-torn history, and only then reverts to what had started this history, an act of violence. He thereby sees that act as underlying the changes or differences marking the history of the institutions, deferring the effect of the originary violence. But the impact of that initial act is also deferred in its content. Properly speaking, the originating violence described in chapter 9, providing an apparent rationale for the leap from Machiavelli to Machiavellism, does not *determine* anything, nor is it endowed with any content; what determines Roman institutions are the later political conflicts that have impelled the history of the state. The origin remains absolutely undetermined: it only opens the way to an ever deferred history. As in Derrida, the initiating premise is a difference whose meaning is deferred.

Knowing an opportunity thus implies knowledge of an encounter made valid and consistent by reaching a point where it comes to express a necessity. We could say that a function of Machiavelli’s thought is to manifest this necessity by unravelling the relations that constitute it, thus revealing the opportunity presented by the encounter. Chapter 6 of the *Prince* analyses this process, which alone testifies that the opportunity has been encountered and that matter has thereby taken form – the form of an enduring order which, in turn, allows knowledge of the occasion that brought it into being.

### **Forms of matter**

Let me now turn to this process whereby opportunity is encountered and the matter of history acquires form. To put it this way implies a materialistic conception of the relation between form

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<sup>7</sup> For the first time in the historiography of Rome: see Thomas Berns, *Violence de la loi à la Renaissance. L’originnaire du politique chez Machiavel et Montaigne* (Paris : Kimé, 2000), 43-70.

and matter. Here, Machiavelli evokes the notion of force. As we will see, the issue of force confronts us with a difficulty: intuitively, from a perspective we might call instrumentalist, we conceive of force as separating form from matter, because force is mobilized towards and justified by an order that is already given. Machiavelli's text actively resists such an interpretation. It suggests there was no such preexistent order – that is to say, an instrumentalist reading cannot validate the idea of knowledge of the opportunity.

Let us examine, then, how Machiavelli inscribes an enduring order, not underpinned by preexistent necessities, into what I have already presented as the encounter between *virtù* and fortune. The problem with *nuovi ordini*, says Machiavelli, is not only that they hurt those who were profiting from the earlier dispensation and are therefore 'enemies' of the new, but even more (and it is not trivial that Machiavelli emphasizes this aspect) that they are supported only in a mild or lukewarm way by those they are meant to benefit. This is due to the incredulity of the latter group: people do not believe in new things ('non credano in verità le cose nuove') until they acquire firm experience ('una ferma esperienza') of them.<sup>8</sup> This factor of novelty should be borne in mind, while admitting that such firm experience is by definition deferred, so that acceptance is indeed reduced to a question of 'belief'.

### **Forcing belief**

Here again, Machiavelli premises not a cognitive register based on firm experience but a belief that must be forced. The later part of Chapter 6 consists entirely of driving home, repeatedly and insistently, the precariousness of a new order and the need to force belief in it. New princes cannot merely play the prophet, or pray ('preghino', which can be interpreted as repeating or reiterating the article of belief): they must enforce belief through force. Machiavelli uses the verb *forzare* twice without a complement. Force is not external to what it acts upon. It does not force something else but sites its operation within itself: it does not force an order upon matter from outside. In contrast to Savonarola, an effective prophet must therefore be armed to sustain a belief that would otherwise crumble. It is necessary to 'force belief' ('fare credere per forza') to establish a new order. Machiavelli repeats the idea several times, always combining the registers of belief and force.

What is this force that is so essential to construct and sustain belief? By linking force with belief in this way, Machiavelli implicitly dismisses two alternative possibilities, one dispensing with force and the other with belief.

The first possibility, which he explicitly raises and dismisses, is that prayer or prophecy might be enough in itself to induce belief in a new order, that merely repeating the prophecy would suffice. We know that Savonarola, in his *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, and particularly in the opening lines of the third part, utterly excludes the possibility of establishing a political regime by the force of arms. He justifies this stand by arguing that force

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<sup>8</sup> *The Prince* ch.6.

has no common ground with reason, as the latter is unable to resist force<sup>9</sup>. He affirms in the clearest way, mainly in his *Sermons* but also in his texts about prophecy (the *Compiendio di rivelazioni* and the *Dialogus de veritate prophetica*), that the divine will acts directly upon his prophetic speech, making it an instrument for guiding the Christian community without need for mediation. Machiavelli responds radically to this unmediated power of prophecy by insisting upon the insufficiency of prophecy by itself to found a new order. To understand his position, we need to revisit his premise of the lukewarm engagement of the political majority to the new order. Already in his letter to Ricciardo Becchi (8 March 1498), Machiavelli recounts that Savonarola's mistake lies in the fact that he considers, beyond the 'bad' that opposed him and the 'good' that supported him, a third type of persons, neither good nor bad, unable to tell good from evil, but who, in a direct conflict between the good and the bad, would side with the good.<sup>10</sup> In chapter 6 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli again rejects the notion that this third type of person will spontaneously join the 'good' in the event of a serious conflict with the 'bad'. The incredulity of the majority cannot be tackled through the prophetic message alone. It requires the addition of force to prophecy, 'fare credere per forza'.

Yet Machiavelli is equally, if only implicitly, opposed to the idea that force by itself can ensure obedience to a new order – as if this order was not at all a matter of belief, as if it was founded independently of what it involves, as if it was already fully established and grounded in firm experience. Such a scenario might be credited to cities such as Sparta, which had, since its origin, enjoyed a perfect constitution that needed only to be conserved. In the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli consistently dismisses such an ordered and well-defined scenario with respect to Rome. In the absence of a firm proven order, the lack of belief ('incredulity') of the lukewarm majority can only be tackled in terms of belief, even if the belief has to be forced: it cannot simply rely on the founded and rational character of the intended reform.

These two rival possibilities are what Machiavelli avoids by binding belief to force: in other words, adopting Savonarola's perspective to a certain point but finally diverging on the question of arms. Both these viewpoints being eschewed, it is evident that the use of the classic antithesis of form *versus* matter cannot, in Machiavelli, be understood as if the latter entity is passive. In fact, the two viewpoints are rejected precisely because they assume the unilateral imposition of an autonomous form upon passive matter. Instead, form and matter are placed in an interactive relationship: order, resulting from form infused in matter, is not the actualization of a potential enshrined in prayer or obedience, but the expression of a state of power that is perpetually being enacted, a belief that is constantly being forced. 'Forcing belief' in Machiavelli's sense thus allows us to dispense with both religious and juridical assumptions in and for themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, Third Treatise, Chapter One, in *Selected Writings. Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, Yale University, 2006, p. 197-198.

<sup>10</sup> Lettera a Ricciardo Becchi (8 marzo 1498): *Tutte le opere*, 1011.

To sum up my argument so far: for opportunity can be *known*, it is necessary to *force belief* in a new order, rather than relying on prophetic speech as sufficient to establish the belief, and rather than relying on the legitimacy of the order concerned as requiring only to be maintained. This way of thinking about the relation between order and matter does not assume the exteriority and autonomy of the former. Another, even broader way of saying this is to consider the specificity of political knowledge in Machiavelli to be entirely shaped by a series of ‘pure’ or ‘raw’ relations: not so much links between cause and effect, or means and ends, as associations that Machiavelli endows with necessity. The concomitant of this raw materiality of relations is, of course, that their meaning or purport is always postponed, deferred. I will now demonstrate this from some famous passages in the early chapters of the *Discorsi*.

### **Thinking relations**

In *Discorsi* 1:2, Machiavelli presents various possible scenarios for a mixed constitution. First, he describes the constitutions of cities such as Sparta, which had the good fortune to have, since their founding, a perfect constitution which they needed only to preserve. Such a scenario relies on the exceptional virtue and rationality of one good founding legislator, which in turn depends on fortune (both of which factors can be considered totally extrinsic): in a larger sense, these cities are condemned to conserve themselves. With such a situation, Machiavelli contrasts the history of Rome, which had not benefited from the same initial good fortune. On the contrary, Rome worked out its own fortune through a series of hardships and upsets. The fact that Rome did not have a prudent legislator like Lycurgus at the outset, but an inconclusive origin followed by persistent internal dissensions, was the driving force behind its own kind of order, an order immanent in the disorder that produced and forced it.

The difference between these two possible scenarios, one inscribed at the time of origin and the other always deferred, produces a basic and lasting distinction in the history of political thought: between a city or state whose form and fortune have been determined at its foundation, and one whose form and fortune evolve through its history. The former is necessarily limited from the demographic and institutional point of view: it might certainly be peaceful, but can only maintain and preserve its own original form. The latter is plural and populous, open as regards its institutions, and imbued by conflict; it can change and expand (*Discorsi* 1.2-6).

The distinction is essentially qualitative: it defines two possible designs, two ways of thinking about civic order. Machiavelli is drawn to the ‘Roman’ design, with the series of relations that constitute it, as providing a singular model even though, he acknowledges, it appears contrary to the true *vivere politico* (*Discorsi* 1:6). He thereby elevates a non-model to the rank of a model. Both models seem legitimate; which one we choose depends on whether we wish to consider a republic that would set up an empire or a republic which only to maintain itself in its current state (*Discorsi* 1:5). Both models are constituted, equally and exclusively, by a set of relations. These are the magisterial equations drawn by Machiavelli: a state determined by its origins, closed, aristocratic, peaceful, limited and conservative, *versus* one determined by its history – open, popular, tumultuous and expansive.

At the start of *Discorsi* 1:4, Machiavelli deconstructs the traditional reading of Roman history,<sup>11</sup> which, by conceiving of the Roman disorder as a mere lack or absence of order, has to seek an external force to explain its greatness, either divine providence or military virtue.<sup>12</sup> Machiavelli's reading does not deny the disorder, but finds a strength in it, linking it to Roman liberty and expansionism. Again, there is no passive element in the equation.

We can go further and consider that Machiavelli's choice of Rome as the subject of his study, against the traditional idea of a model as stable and balanced, makes it apparent that we are contemplating a series of pure relations. What counts here is that this series of relations is impermeable, hermetically exclusive of other possible relations. There can be no middle path between the two models, such as would result from an Aristotelian approach; no possible balance between them, taking into consideration the apparent advantages of each, peace in the aristocratic model and power in the Roman model. Even worse, says Machiavelli in the ch. 6 of the first book of the *Discorsi*, given the fact that history is a perennial movement, given the fact that 'necessity pushes you to things that reason does not',<sup>13</sup> Rome represents *in fine* the most interesting grounds for refuting the claims of reason. The last word is thereby given precisely by the impossibility of conceiving of a form external to the matter of history: the last word is deferred; so is the sense of opportunity.

In the *Prince* as well as the *Discorsi*, force or conflict are the expression of the collective experiment of belief in something that, being new, or being linked to the unstable 'course of events' ('occorrenza degli accidenti'),<sup>14</sup> resists the classic cognitive experience and must therefore be viewed as deferred. Because it is difficult to believe in such new things, force must be invoked to make it possible. To put it positively, this means that we are led by force to believe in new things, the experience of which is by definition difficult, unavailable, deferred, reliant on the course of events. And this idea can only be expressed through these suites of pure relations proposed by Machiavelli whose meaning is deferred.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Discorsi* 1:4 (*Tutte le opere*, 82): 'the opinion of many that Rome, having been a tumultuous republic and full of much confusion, would have remained inferior to all other republics if good fortune and military virtue have not had compensated for these flaws' ('la opinione di molti che dicono, Roma essere stata una repubblica tumultuaria, e piena di tanta confusione che, se la buona fortuna e la virtù militare non avesse sopperito a' loro difetti, sarebbe stata inferiore a ogni altra repubblica').

<sup>12</sup> This interpretation, which we find, for example, in St. Augustine and which Machiavelli here reverses, is based on the same equation linking an originating act of violence (Romulus killing his brother, opening the doors of Rome to the brigands, the rape of the Sabine women, etc.) to the internal conflicts of the city and to external wars: see Thomas Berns, 'Penser le politique depuis le caractère expansif de la liberté', *Historia Philosophica* 11 (2013), 35-45.

<sup>13</sup> *Discorsi* 1:6: *Tutte le opere*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> *Discorsi* 1:2: *Tutte le opere*, 79.

<sup>15</sup> In *Discorsi* chs. 5, 6, the conquests undertaken by Rome are seen as the deferred expression of the same phenomenon: they are not the achievements of a *virtù* independent of disorder or external to it, but the deferred order of the disorder itself, the expression of the order of the conflicts.

I have suggested that Machiavellian thought is shaped by a series of ‘pure’ or ‘raw’ relations whose meaning is always postponed or deferred. Knowing opportunity, forcing belief, thinking politics on the basis of these sets of pure relations – all these are expressions of a certain kind of knowledge: a knowledge that does not support any previous certainty about the adequacy of the order created by form instilled in matter. At the same time, such knowledge is oriented to that order: it is an acknowledgement that a belief has been forced – that is to say, an event has occurred, behind which lies a series of relations and tensions (constitutive elements of what Althusser calls a ‘conjuncture’<sup>16</sup>) confirmed by a collective process. These elements are never referred to an external, anterior order that could dissolve those relations or bypass the tensions that inhabit them. Machiavellian thought is fully oriented towards this kind of knowledge.

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The conquests are a sign of the expansive character of freedom, which means freedom of the largest number; hence internal conflict can produce order. On this subject, see my book *La Guerre des Philosophes*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2019.

<sup>16</sup>More precisely, this immanent necessity is what Althusser called ‘penser *sous* la catégorie de conjuncture’ (‘thinking *under* the category of conjuncture: italics mine), not *about* the conjuncture (‘penser *sur* la conjuncture’): Louis Althusser, *Machiavel et nous* (Paris : Tallandier, 2009), 55. This is also what Deleuze, situating himself in the tradition of Spinoza, Nietzsche and Foucault, called thinking of the ‘content of possibilities’ of a situation, the potential inherent in it (which does not contradict the ‘liberty or creativity’ of a *dispositif* or a mode of existence), in order to express the possibility of weighing it ‘without any appeal to transcendental values’: Gilles Deleuze, ‘What is a *dispositif*?’ in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, trans. Timothy J. Armstrong (New York: Routledge, 1992), 163.