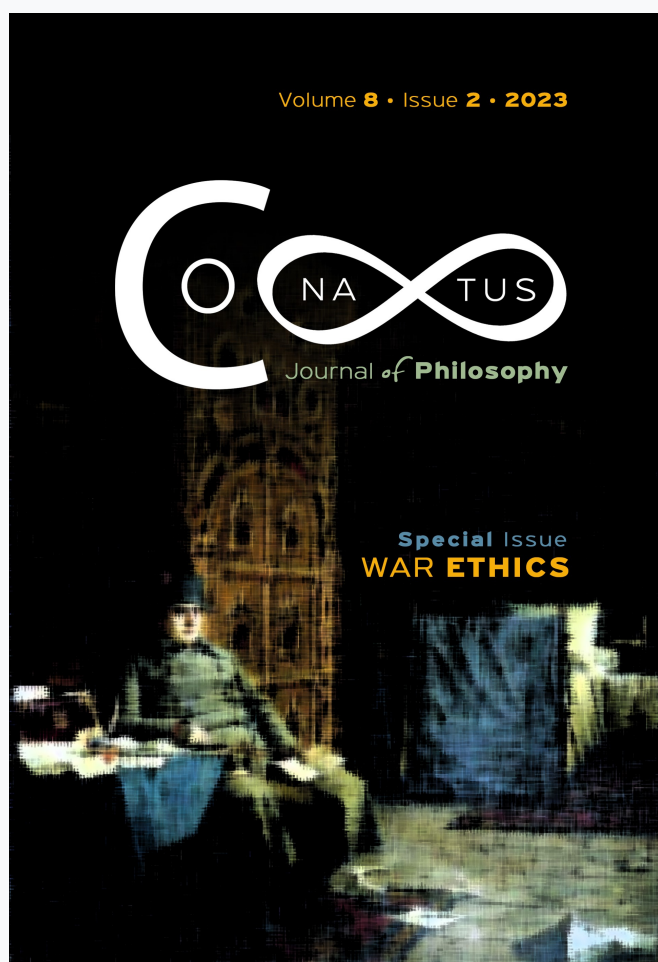


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 8, No 2 (2023)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: War Ethics



### Machiavelli's Ethics on Expansion and Empire

Elias Vavouras

doi: [10.12681/cjp.35110](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35110)

Copyright © 2023, Elias Vavouras



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Vavouras, E. (2023). Machiavelli's Ethics on Expansion and Empire. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8(2), 703–723. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35110>

# Machiavelli's Ethics on Expansion and Empire

**Elias Vavouras**

*University of Western Macedonia, Greece*

*E-mail address: [ivavouras@uowm.gr](mailto:ivavouras@uowm.gr)*

*ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5334-0743>*

## Abstract

*Machiavelli believes that the expansion of a state is inevitable. Human affairs are characterized by constant movement and change, and expansion is the necessary stage of a state moving towards its prosperity. But there are historical examples of states that tried to stand stable for centuries and resist movement and expansion, but ultimately failed, because they were not prepared to grow by themselves or to deal with the growth of their enemies. This article tries to interpret the Machiavellian arguments that support the thesis that the expansion of a state is inevitable and argue that its entrenchment within its borders is something contrary not only to the nature of human affairs but also to the proper constitution of the state. Also, the crucial question is whether Machiavelli's positions have ethical foundations rooted either in human natural right or in the modes or means of expansion. From this point of view, the terms hegemony and empire acquire a different meaning and a different moral dimension.*

**Keywords:** *Machiavelli; natural right; hegemony; empire; expansion; ethics; political philosophy; dominion; greed*

## I. The human nature

But above all the Prince must keep his hands off the material goods of his subjects. Men forget much more quickly the killing of their father than the loss of their patrimony.  
*The Prince*, XVII

**M**achiavelli considers that the human condition is inherent in the greedy expansion over others. Humans are driven by a natural necessity to constantly increase the material goods in their possession and nothing can stop this expansive natural 'storm.'

Although Machiavellian political thought has no systematic form, there exists a greedy individualism with a materialistic orientation as a structural characteristic of human nature, which impels humans to action. Humans forget the death of their father more easily than the loss of their father's wealth,<sup>1</sup> because the loss of material goods works inversely to the greedy addition of new goods. When one adds material goods, regardless of whether they are useful to him or not, he feels happy, while when he loses material goods, he must feel unhappy. By the same logic, the ruler must be very sparing in granting material privileges to his subjects, which makes them happy, not so much because he or the state lacks them, but because men consider you extremely hateful, if you contemplate, due to some need, taking away from them what you have granted them. Later, Hobbes, inheriting the pessimistic Machiavellian anthropology, would agree that happiness is nothing more than the continuous progress from one pleasant material good to another, a progress interrupted only by death.<sup>2</sup>

Human nature cannot be fixed in a state of blissful autarky, this inner tendency to acquire more goods will always push it into movement and change, away from happiness. If men succeed in reaching a state of happiness and autarky they will immediately feel satiated and fall into a state of unhappiness. In the same way, when there is a shortage of material goods, men feel deprived and their tendency of greed drives them to acquire more. We could say that this natural tendency creates movement and change in human activity either for the better or for the worse, but it can rarely be organized in an orderly manner.<sup>3</sup> This tendency towards movement characterizes human pathology, with passions being the cause of change and acting in opposition to order and stability. Machiavelli also represents the wheel of fortune in the same way; the good or bad fortune of people cannot remain constant, because men are dominated by powerful passions, which inevitably cause movement and lead them sometimes to the top and sometimes to the bottom of the wheel of fortune. In this perspective the passion-filled human nature is identified with the factor of fortune, while nature is identified with fortune; this keeps man captive to imperfection and, therefore, to unhappiness.

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, Vol. I, ed. and trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), XVII: 63.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. John C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), XI: 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> Markus Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," *The Review of Politics* 59, no. 4 (1997): 789-829.

Men, therefore, have a natural tendency towards greed, towards increasing the material goods they own at the expense of others. Whoever can expand on other men is essentially the winner of the political game. Expansion is equated with power; there can be no individual power without expansive imposition on others. To have political power without extending it to the other political parties lacks substance, as power is validated through imposition on others and the transformation of subjectivity into objectivity. Political domination means that one can impose and extend his subjectivity as objectivity to the rest of the political parties.<sup>4</sup> The state is the highest expression of this power, as it surpasses in terms of power every individual and can manage the material goods of the subjects.

Subjective expansion and enforcement are not only done in the material realm, but also in the spiritual through ideological propaganda. The most successful expansion is not through weapons, but through ideology.<sup>5</sup> Jesus is an unarmed prophet, yet he is much more successful than the armed prophets, as he has succeeded in convincing people to willingly embrace the ideological propaganda of the Christian religion. If any state came to the level of functioning like ecclesiastical hegemonies, its level of enforcement would be greatly increased,<sup>6</sup> because the subjects would willingly acquiesce to the ideology of the state, which is reproduced through institutions. Political science must no longer follow the classics, Plato or Aristotle, who vainly attempted to perfect the human condition through state's institutions, but the ideological dominance of the Christian religion, wherein the state ideologically controls men and keeps them loyal to the subjective expediency of state's institutions.

Therefore, in the human condition, the act of extending dominion over others in any way is not reprehensible, or at the very least, if it is not praised because of the cruelty or treachery of the means used, it does not invite censure. The non-reprehensibility of expansion at the expense of others rests on the fact that greed is a structural feature of human nature. Yes, domineering expansion and grabbing material goods from others may not be praiseworthy, it may be repulsive, but still eminently human. Human nature goes hand in hand with greed and we cannot get rid of it. Machiavelli bases the justification of man's greedy expansion on a de facto moral consequence. This ethics is not

---

<sup>4</sup> Maurizio Viroli, "Machiavelli's Realism," *Constellations* 14, no. 4 (2007): 466-482.

<sup>5</sup> Santra B. Drury, "The Hidden Meaning of Strauss's Thoughts on Machiavelli," *History of Political Thought* 6, no. 3 (1985): 575-590.

<sup>6</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XI: 44.

in question because it derives from human natural right that inclines towards greed. At this point, conventional morality collapses in the face of human nature, i.e. natural ethics.<sup>7</sup> When one has so much power that one is not condemned by conventional law or international agreements, then greed over others is something completely human, and therefore something completely justified.

## II. Expansion due to necessity

It is indeed a very natural and common thing the desire to acquire; and always, when men can effect it, they will be praised, or at least not censured; but when, however, they cannot, and want to effect it by all means, herein lies the fault, and the accusations arise.

*The Prince*, III

Machiavelli turns his attention on two historical paradigms<sup>8</sup> to show how necessity drives to expansion in the historical field. Aeneas and Moses, recognizing the necessity of the historical times, leave their territory and look for a new place to expand their power. This move is not easy, as they encounter many obstacles to establishing a new political order, but it is dictated by necessity. These two rulers are included by Machiavelli among the founders of cities, because they manage to establish new states and impose their own modes of rule and their own institutions, which have survived for a long time. In both cases the future looked bleak, irreversible annihilation was at hand, and yet they managed at the last moment to activate their virtue and impose their will on history. In contrast to this gloomy historical condition, which was transformed by virtù into greatness, the situation in Florence never reached such extreme events. Perhaps this breeds Florentine indolence and prevents the appearance of virtù.

Machiavelli considers that man is always in interaction with necessity, either of his nature or of circumstances, and it is up to him to make the right decisions to create his own subjective construction. Human reason is called to create while being captive to the material of construction; the relationship of the subject with the material of creation and the correct arrangement will lead to virtù. Human choices are free; they can be directed either to success or to destruction. The question is whether free will is properly adapted to the necessity of the circumstances. Many times, adverse circumstances push a unique path of creation and only human determination is needed, so that the material takes a magnificent form, as happened in the cases of Moses

<sup>7</sup> Faisal Baluch, "Machiavelli as Philosopher," *The Review of Politics* 80, no. 2 (2018): 289-300.

<sup>8</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI: 25-26; Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 8: 345.

or Aeneas. Other times the necessity is limited and there are many paths to successfully format the material, but the human subject is either lazy or chooses the wrong directions. The correctness of the choice lies in the rational analysis of the empirical data but also in the decisive formatting of the historical-political material.

Expansion, therefore, is dictated either by the inherent greed of human nature or by the necessity of times. In both cases we are dealing with an unavoidable necessity. Both nature and historical-political facts impose their dire necessity on man, who is called upon to manage them through his right choices. Human nature and circumstances equal to chance, to the unstable factor of fortune. When one invokes fortune to justify his failure or disaster, he is actually confessing his inability to read and control necessity. How could he accuse Aeneas or Moses of doing wrong in choosing to expand to other places when necessity prompted them to do so? In fact, they did nothing more than perceive correctly the particularities of the historical material and through correct choices proceed with their virtù in a decisive creation. Instead, a certain Byzantine emperor, by avoiding taking matters into his own hands in order to expand his power, brought the Turks to the Balkan peninsula and they extended their rule to their advantage.<sup>9</sup> Everything is a matter of right choices and decisive application of those choices.

### III. Expansion due to autarky

That which does not belong to you or to your subjects, you may give generously, as Cyrus, Caesar, and Alexander did; when you spend other states' goods, your reputation is not damaged, on the contrary, it is increased; when you waste your own goods, that is what harms you.  
*The Prince*, XVI

In chapter XVI of *The Prince* Machiavelli refers to the liberality of the state or political ruler. Liberality in the provision of material goods gives to the subjects a sense of pleasure and satisfaction because it expands their private wealth. Individuals experience a continuous enjoyment of greed and increase in their material possessions, and the ruler or state gains a good reputation in the sense that conditions of material prosperity are created, which most people equate with human happiness. The liberality of the state goes hand in hand with the tendency of human nature for expansion and greed.

However, such a generous policy is destined to fail, first because men, while they experience the greatest happiness when they increase their wealth of material goods if for some reason the state has to

---

<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XIII: 52.

take them away, then they experience the greatest unhappiness. Therefore, the generous provision of goods is a risky action, because the satisfaction of human greed also breeds human unhappiness, since the more men acquire the unhappier they become if they lose it.

Furthermore, while human greed and expansion are inexhaustible, the state's reserves are not. So, it is inevitable that, if the liberality to the subjects continues, at some point the material resources of the state will be significantly limited, and harsh measures, such as high taxation, will be the only option for the state. This is detrimental to the sovereign power because its good reputation is destroyed in the eyes of the subjects, who now regard it with utter suspicion, as a factor that diminishes their prosperity and opposes their individualistic expansion. It is better, then, for a ruler to be parsimonious from the start and not provide material rewards to his subjects, so that he does not have to face the insatiable tendency of human nature and the bad reputation that will accompany him if he is forced to draw resources from the goods of the body politic.

There is, however, a case where the liberality of the state and the material well-being of the subjects do not cancel each other out. This is the perspective of imperial expansion against other states. For a state to be generous it must provide goods either from its own stock, or from that of its subjects through levies and taxes, or by seizing them from other state entities, which will then become vassals.<sup>10</sup> Caesar at the beginning of his political career spent his own money, in order to become popular and rise to office, but once he achieved this, he became completely parsimonious and was generous only through utilizing the goods of the vassal states within the Roman empire. With those that do not belong to the state itself and to its subjects the ruler can be extremely generous and beneficent, ensuring both his excellent reputation and the material well-being of the people of his territory. But the main cause of this prosperity is the satisfaction of the tendency of greed of human nature which equates material expansion with happiness. Imperial expansion ensures individualistic expansion within the civil society and paves the way for the prosperity of the subjects. In this perspective the only prospect of satisfying human nature within the political community is empire, that is, expansion against other political entities and the usurpation of their material resources. Machiavelli uses, to support this argument, the examples of Alexander and Cyrus, who acquired the reputation of being generous

---

<sup>10</sup> Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38-75.

by spending the goods of other states, which they conquered. Here we have yet another moral justification for imperialist expansion, based on human nature's tendency to expand, but also on the conception of happiness as held by many. One might say that at this point the Machiavellian analysis considers imperialist expansion inevitable when a state attempts to establish a material well-being on a social-political and individual level, albeit with certain aspirations. Autarky within the state is a consequence of external expansion.

#### IV. Expansion or non-expansion? The paradigms of Sparta and Rome

Nonetheless (as I have said another time when discussing the difference that existed between being organized for conquest and being organized for preservation) it is impossible that a Republic succeeds in remaining stable and enjoying its liberty and its limited confines; for even if it does not molest others, it will be molested: and from being molested there will arise the will and desire for conquest: and even if it should not have any outside enemies, it would find some at home, as it appears necessary to occur to all great Cities.  
*Discourses*, II, 19

In the *Discourses* (I, 6) Machiavelli examines the issue of the stability of the constitutions in relation to the expansion of the state.<sup>11</sup> Sparta is the basic paradigm to his analysis for two reasons, firstly because it managed to keep its constitution stable for an extremely long time and secondly because it remained quiescent in its territory without expanding until it was forced to do so during the Peloponnesian War, which marked the beginning of its decline. It is noteworthy, in regard to the first reason, that the stability of the Spartan constitution is not based on institutional or economic factors, but on the restraint of human nature's tendency to greed and expansion. Spartan institutions kept both the rulers and the nobles, and of course the common people, poor, that is, without the possibility of acquiring material goods so that no political party could release the destructive urge to acquire more. Two other factors played a decisive role in this restriction, the small number of the inhabitants of Sparta which made it easy to enforce laws and governance, but also the exclusion of their interaction with other people and other cities, which prevented the corruption of their political morals. The genius of the lawgiver Lycurgus, then, lies not in establishing effective or functional laws, but in relating his laws to a pessimistic view of human nature. Spartan laws, and by extension, its constitution were based on the notion that human nature is insatiable and tends to desire more than it really needs, but also that it wishes

---

<sup>11</sup> Maurizio Viroli, *The Quotable Machiavelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 157-159.

to extend its greed to others. Greed becomes real if one acquires more relative to the others if one increases his material possessions while others do not. The oligarchy of the Spartans is identified with the limitation of the expansion of human nature; this is for Machiavelli the real essence of the constitution of Sparta and the real reason for the non-expansion at the level of international relations. Limiting the individual expansion of subjects within the state also prevents imperial expansion outside of it. In the case of Sparta there is an absolute identification of the individual with the public and this creates an amazing political unity.

Machiavelli, extending his reasoning from the inside to the outside, notes that, in order to keep a state away from the tendency of expansion, in addition to the control of human nature by institutions, one must take care of two other parameters that existed in the Spartan case. Non-expansion presupposes a fortified location which, combined with a ready for war and well exercised army, will prevent any expansionist thought by any would-be conqueror. If these are carried out, no one will attempt the conquest of this state, because its location and its military readiness will prevent anyone from acting hostilely.<sup>12</sup> Also, due to its being isolated, along with its institutions that keep its subjects poor and devoid of expansionist ambitions, this small state will not pose a threat to rival states. These facts can keep a state away from its own expansion against other state entities, but also prevent other states from moving expansively towards it, because imperial expansion occurs when conquest is easy or when a state develops so much power that it worries the rest, that will want to restrain it for fear of losing their material resources to it or, worse, coming under its expansive control. Sparta remained stable and unscathed because it disabled the two causes of war against it, a) its location and military preparedness constituted a maximum deterrent force, while b) its historical non-expansionist tendency did not mobilize the fear of other states nor the need to stop its movement. Her deterrent power and belief in the doctrine of quiescence or immobility did not motivate her opponents to include her in their expansive field.

However, in the end, expansion can be limited<sup>13</sup> but not completely prevented, because human affairs are in constant motion and nothing can be completely fixed; the absolute political tranquility of Sparta,

---

<sup>12</sup> Catherine H. Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 129-130.

<sup>13</sup> Filippo Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 55-59.

though admirable, cannot easily become a perpetual reality. Sparta, concerned about the excessive growth of Athenian power which would perhaps result in its own shrinking, was driven by the historical necessity to expand and, thus, began a long war of expansion in which it eventually emerged as a triumphant power as it extended its hegemony over the entire Greek territory. But then, according to Machiavelli, its inadequacy was seen in terms of maintaining its possessions, because the small number of its armed citizens was not sufficient to maintain this hegemony. Sparta was made by its institutions not to expand, and, as soon as she was forced to it by the times, she collapsed at the first serious rebellion against it. Expansion is the deadly poison to states which are made in such a way as not to expand themselves or raise expansionist movements against them, and the necessity of human nature will force them to 'taste' it at some point, that moment may be hundreds of years late, as in the case of Sparta, yet it will inevitably come someday.

Machiavelli no doubt admired Sparta's non-expansion state structure and its stability that prevented individualistic expansion within the city and imperial expansion abroad. He considers the Spartan balance between individual and foreign expansion to be a true political activity and a vindication of the Spartan doctrine of tranquility in domestic and foreign policy. However, being pessimistic about the constancy of human affairs and the improvement of human nature he holds up the imperial expansion of Rome as exemplary.<sup>14</sup> The institutions of Rome allowed it to be glorified and transform from a simple city into an empire. The people of Rome were numerous and well-armed, forming its legions. Also, within this state there has always been a great disparity in material possessions among the people and the Senate, the people being poor and the senators wealthy, which created a continuing harmful enmity between these two classes,<sup>15</sup> based on the human tendency for greed. The nobles have an advantage over the people in terms of material goods and thus feel happy, while the people feeling unhappy want to seize the material goods of the nobles. But for Machiavelli this internal disharmony and its destructive effects throughout the ages are inevitable when a state that wants to glorify itself through imperial expansion. Rome followed the greedy tendency of human nature and expanded as an empire while dealing

---

<sup>14</sup> James Hankins, "Machiavelli, Civic Humanism, and the Humanist Politics of Virtue," *Italian Culture* 32, no. 2 (2014): 98-109.

<sup>15</sup> Pasquale Pasquino, "Machiavelli and Aristotle: The Anatomies of the City," *History of European Ideas* 35 (2009): 397-407.

with internal turmoil. Its success lies in the acceptance of human nature that tends towards expansion at the expense of others, but also in its large and well-armed population, the experience of which was the main reason for the preservation of its imperial acquisitions.

Strauss notes that imperialist expansion is one of Machiavelli's primary objectives for any integrated state:

1. freedom from foreign domination and from despotic rule,
2. stability or rule of law,
3. prosperity (security of life, of property and of honor of every citizen, the continuous increase of wealth and power of the state),
4. glory or power (i.e., empire).<sup>16</sup>

Power or glory equals expansion and empire.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the subjective ideology reproduced by each state's institutions, expansion is inevitably linked to the realization of its power and prosperity. Power without extension is not power but weakness or indolence. Rome was born on an immoral act, on a fratricide, its institutions were the product of an immoral subjectivity that its founders tried to impose as moral objectivity. The subjective purpose of each state expressed by the state's ideology requires the compliance of each political part with it, and institutions serve this goal.<sup>18</sup> The direction of the positive law of each state entity is governed by the subjective direction of the sovereign power.<sup>19</sup> However, imperial expansion as a goal of the state is something objective regardless of the subjective ideology that its institutions serve. Whether we speak e.g., for a capitalist state or a socialist state, imperial expansion is inevitable if we are to believe that this state fulfills the basic parameters of its development and maintenance. Thus, the Machiavellian example of imperialist and expansionist Rome finds its expression in every state of every form or era.

Expansionary war, therefore, is a continuation and completion of domestic politics; without expansion the state is doomed to annihilation because necessity will at some point push it to compete in

<sup>16</sup> Elias Vavouras, "The Machiavellian Reality of Leo Strauss," *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2022): 265-273; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 256; Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?" in Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 41.

<sup>17</sup> Viroli, *The Quotable Machiavelli*, 154-156.

<sup>18</sup> Harvey C. Jr. Mansfield, "Strauss's Machiavelli," *Political Theory* 3, no. 4 (1975): 372-384.

<sup>19</sup> Rasoul Namazi, "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture," *Interpretation* 43, no. 3 (2017): 431-460.

the international arena with other states for its existence. So, expansion is in this sense a form of preventive war or treatment. First, it nurtures the unsatisfied human nature that constantly wants more material goods, and these goods are better spent from the spoils of expansion than from the state's own resources, and this imparts a calmness and a sense of autarky to domestic politics. When all are under a constant pleasure of greed, they do not want to usurp each other's goods, and thus internal conflicts are lessened. Second, a state that knows how to expand and maintain its possessions is much less at risk than another that passively awaits the expansionist vortex of other state formations. The Machiavellian state echoes the insatiability of the human process toward individualism and materialism, and its goal is to extend this subjective perception of happiness upon others in order to maintain its own perspective of well-being.

### V. Hegemony or empire?

But because human affairs are in constant motion, and can never remain stable, it happens that states either grow or decline: and necessity leads you to do many things which reason will never lead you to do. Thus, having created a state capable of maintaining itself without expanding, if necessity compelled it to expand, its foundations would collapse completely and its destruction would be rapid.  
*Discourses*, I. VI

But what is Rome's mode of expansion that significantly differentiates it from Sparta? One would expect Machiavelli to place Athens as Sparta's formidable rival. Instead, he places it between Venice and Rome. Venice differs from Sparta in the means of expansion; Sparta's power lies in its well-organized army made up of native inhabitants, while Venice prevails through its economic power. Although the polity of these two states is remarkably similar and has long remained stable preventing internal unrest, their means of expansion differ. However, both of these states fail to maintain the hegemony they achieved in different ways because their constitutions were not structured to favor expansion. Athens, however, on the other hand has a constitution different from Sparta and has used both modes of expansion, both the powerful army on land and sea and the financial means by controlling the coffers of the Delian League. For Machiavelli, a similarity of Athens to Sparta in the mode of expansion is enough to classify it in a different group of states from Rome. Athens, Sparta and Venice tried to impose a kind of expansionist hegemony on their subject states<sup>20</sup> and this differentiates them from Rome, which

---

<sup>20</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 4: 336.

expanded as an empire. Here Machiavelli, to separate Rome's ways of expansion from the rest of the expansionist examples, introduces the distinction between *hegemony* (*dominio*) and *empire* (*imperio*).<sup>21</sup> Hegemony is a relationship of servitude between a sovereign and his subjects where the force of arms determines the relations of justice. On the contrary, empire constitutes the voluntary accession of a state to the sovereignty of another, where it may also have some role, equal or unequal, of co-government. The difference between hegemony and empire consists in the voluntary or involuntary imposition of sovereignty by one state on others, but also in the extent to which the subject states participate in determining governmental decisions.<sup>22</sup>

Erica Benner provides a detailed exposition of the Machiavellian arguments<sup>23</sup> regarding the modes of expansion. For Machiavelli there are three ways<sup>24</sup> of expansion:

a. *Equal expansion through state coalitions or federations* (*compagni, equal partnership*), where a state can increase its power through an equal relationship with other states at the level of an international alliance or co-government. The historical example mentioned in this case is the Tuscan League,<sup>25</sup> where twelve cities managed power equally and significantly expanded their sovereignty. In fact, the states that were part of the expansion of the alliance were not enslaved to it, but became equal members of the federation. Analogous historical examples of this way of expansion are the Leagues of the Achaeans and Aetolians in ancient Greece, but also of the Swiss in the days of Machiavelli. In Machiavelli's view, a coalition of states can participate on equal terms in governance, but also, a powerful state can be authorized by the rest of the states to play the role of a sovereign representative and acquire, with the consent of the rest, a leadership character in the exercise of power. Federated states have the advantage of avoiding internal and external conflicts, but also easily hold their possessions through equality between partners. Their disadvantage is that due to their fragmented form, they are unable to make immediate decisions and thus become passive; being satisfied with the prosperity enjoyed by each of them they avoid further collective expansion. Thus, according to Machiavelli, a federation of equal states

<sup>21</sup> Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 454.

<sup>22</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 4: 335-339.

<sup>23</sup> Benner, 454-464; Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 21, III, 19; Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, I, 29, IV, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 4: 335-339.

<sup>25</sup> Zuckert, 186-187.

can hardly, if at all, become an all-powerful empire, the lack of central government being a major disadvantage.

b. *Hegemony or absolute submission to one's state power* (subbietti/sudditi, subjection to one), where a state forcibly imposes its sovereignty and its will on other subject states. In this case, there is no political cooperation or equality, but there are relations of absolute dominance and submission. Machiavelli associates this mode of domination with the unbridled tendency of human nature to acquire more, that is, with a pessimistic view of man. It is a tendency dominated by irrational passions and uncritical ambition and equates prosperity with greed and the imposition of subjective power on history by any means.<sup>26</sup> Also, this mode of expansion is also associated with the outbreak of riots and conflicts, because there is an involuntary coercion of subordinate parties to go along with the will of the more powerful. In this category of expansion belong Sparta and Athens, which managed to become hegemonies but failed to maintain their conquests because, on the one hand, their population was not sufficient to maintain the large military force that such a purpose imposes - for this, as said, their constitution is also responsible for not foreseeing the possibility of expansion - on the other hand, absolute sovereignty is in itself a very difficult task, especially in a case where a state does not have equal allies, since the sovereign must be constantly on the lookout for subjects who do not willingly accept his rule and constantly yearn for the freedom<sup>27</sup> from a past circumstance. Allies, too, who will come to assist in war operations, will demand some of the hegemonic sovereignty, which a unilateral hegemony refuses to acknowledge and progressively isolates.

c. *The middle way (making subjects or partners)* with Rome as a dominant example, where the dominant power exhausts every other means in order to make other states allies, but, when it fails to do so, resorts to the last solution of forced, violent submission of them. Rome had a constitution that was compatible with the prospect of expansion, as it exploited the population of the state to man its army and allowed for oppositional relationships between plebeians and nobles in the exercise of power.<sup>28</sup> Also, in terms of foreign policy, at first, he made beneficial alliances on equal terms with the states of Italy and then replicated

<sup>26</sup> Manfred J. Holler, "Niccolò Machiavelli on Power," in *Niccolò Machiavelli: History, Power, and Virtue*, ed. Leonidas Donskis, 27-48 (New York: Rodopi B.V., 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Machiavelli on the Maintenance of Liberty," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 2 (1983): 3-15.

<sup>28</sup> John P. McCormick, "Of Tribunes and Tyrants: Machiavelli's Legal and Extra-Legal Modes for Controlling Elites," *Ratio Juris* 28, no. 2 (2015): 252-66.

this tactic abroad with the difference being that there the states that participated in the Roman empire either willingly or forcibly recognized Rome as dominant power regardless of their own role in the empire. The Romans made allies and granted them powers or consultative power, but the seat of the empire and the sovereign government remained indisputably in Rome. When the Italian states became aware of the Roman foreign policy of expansion they tried to react, but by then it was too late, as Rome from a simple state had become an all-powerful empire. The Roman mode of expansion is double, initially using soft power to secure allies willing to join the empire, but then not hesitating to turn those allies into vassals under the use of hard power when the necessity arises. The middle way of Rome combines the other two modes of expansion, namely consensual alliance and violent hegemony not always in a clean way, as the allies do not realize the deception of the empire; they are deceived into thinking that they will have an equal role, but in the end they end up subjugated under the rule of Roman power. Consent, coercion, and deception are the main features of the Roman mode of expansion; a mixture of federation with hegemony gives us the Machiavellian conception of empire, but rather the element of sovereignty has the final and main say,<sup>29</sup> since the primacy and sovereignty of Rome is something non-negotiable.<sup>30</sup>

## VI. Soft and hard power

That for the city to increase its inhabitants, to make associations for themselves and not subjects, to send colonies to guard the acquired countries, to make capital of the plunder, to subdue the enemy by incursions and engagements, and by sieges, to keep the public rich, the private citizen poor, to maintain military exercises with the greatest zeal, these are the ways to make a Republic great and to acquire Empire. And if these means of expanding did not please them, they would consider that acquisitions by any other means are the ruin of a Republic.  
*Discourses*, II, 19

But what is the essential difference of Rome's middle path of expansion, since it ultimately uses violent coercion against its former allies? Machiavelli is sure to be favorably disposed to the way of extending of the federation, because the consent of the allied states and their equal participation in the exercise of power creates an admirable order and limits conflicts to the utmost. However, his positive

<sup>29</sup> Steven Forde, "Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli," *The Journal of Politics* 54, no. 2 (1992): 372-393.

<sup>30</sup> John G. A. Pocock, "Machiavelli and Rome: The Republic as Ideal and as History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy, 144-166 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

intention does not lead him to turn a blind eye. These kinds of state associations, although they may be quite enduring in historical time, cannot in practice embody the concept of empire. Expansion in this case is doomed from the start, as in the version of Sparta, where its truly admirable and time-resistant constitution is incompatible with the concepts of expansion and empire. But human affairs, especially in the historical-political field, are constantly in motion and nothing can stop their upward or downward course, their tragic existence is directed by the passions of human nature. A state cannot sustain its presence in history, it must harmonize with the movement of human things and its maximum development is equivalent to empire. To provide examples of states that reject maximum expansion means that we reject the idea of the maximum human movement, which is the empire.<sup>31</sup> It is the passions that dominate men and not reason. Greed, i.e., to constantly acquire more in relation to others, is part of the human natural movement that emanates from human nature. Empire, i.e., maximum expansion, is consistent with the human passion of greed but also with maximum movement, while immobility is opposed to human nature as well as to historical-political movement. To be able to construct a feasible political science we must accept man as he is and not as he should be. The idea of empire is at the level of the possible, while immobility tries to get out of human pessimistic reality, and that is why it fails and will fail.

The Roman mode of expansion accepts the continuous mobility of human affairs both internally, i.e., in the constitution of the state, and abroad, i.e., in international relations, and that is why it is more correct than the other expansive modes. But Rome also knows how to apply soft power perfectly against the other states, so that it gets what it needs without wasting its own resources. This is the main characteristic of successful political action according to Machiavelli. In *The Prince* (VIII) Agathocles succeeds from being a simple individual to become the tyrant of Syracuse using mostly hard power, he murders all the prominent citizens in one day in the theater of the city and thus consolidates his rule.<sup>32</sup> According to the Machiavellian concept that the end justifies the means, Agathocles can be judged as successful, since he managed to decisively achieve his goal and give shape to the

---

<sup>31</sup> John G. A. Pocock, "Niccolo Machiavelli and the Imperial Republic," in *Barbarism and Religion: The First Decline and Fall*, ed. John G. A. Pocock, 203-235 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 203-235.

<sup>32</sup> Cecil A. J. Coady, "Dirty Hands," in *Reading Political Philosophy Machiavelli to Mill*, eds. Nigel Warburton, Jon Pike, and Derek Matravers (New York: Routledge, 2000), 59-66.

historical material. However, although Machiavelli does not doubt his virtù and the successful outcome of his actions, he expresses his concern about hard power that he uses. This kind of power must be used when all the means of soft power have disappeared, because on the one hand it paints a negative image of the person or the state that uses such burdensome methods of enforcement, on the other hand it is a short-term means of enforcement, since the true face of the sovereign power is revealed, the ideology served and reproduced by the institutions collapses and the state is faced with its challenge by the political parties. Rome, in terms of foreign policy, exhausts all means of soft power, tries to elicit the consent of others for her rule through her power and greatness, deceives its allies, or rather lets them deceive themselves as to its real intentions, has established an extensive network of institutions and positive law throughout the empire creating a feeling of stability and security in her vassal states and subjects and, if all these fail, is ready to impose hard power by revealing the true face of its dominance. The difference between empire and hegemony is essentially the consequence of using soft power before the inevitable imposition of hard power.<sup>33</sup> The Romans incorporate expansion in the way of federation, to persuade their enemies to become their allies, but in the end make them their vassals.<sup>34</sup> The use of soft and of hard power, of consent and of violence, gives them the true title of empire over the insufficient federation and tyrannical hegemony. This is the Roman middle mode of expansion that earns Machiavelli's emphatic preference.

## VII. Conclusions

So, what can we conclude about the Machiavellian theory of expansion? Is there any base of ethics that justify the expansion of states and the prospect of empire, or are they all relative and justified by the subjective imposition of power in the historical-political field?

a. Expansion is justified by the existence of a natural right in human things.<sup>35</sup> Human nature undoubtedly tends to acquire more goods whether they really need them or not. This strong natural urge, this invincible passion, pushes people to action; the more they acquire

<sup>33</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Powers to Lead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 29-32, 38-44.

<sup>34</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 1: 324-327, 3: 334-335.

<sup>35</sup> Elias Vavouras, "Natural Right and Historicism: From Thucydides to Marx," *Cogito* 8, no. 1 (2021): 7-20.

material goods, the more satisfied and yet unsatisfied they feel. So, in order for a state to continuously satisfy its subjects and provide them with material goods, it must necessarily expand to increase its resources. Expansion is morally justified under the power of human natural right.<sup>36</sup>

b. Yes, but some states, such as Sparta, have managed to limit human greed and impose a kind of self-restraint on their subjects and also on the expansive aspirations of the state; this in philosophical terminology is called *prudence*. In fact, the notion represented by these cases is that human natural right dictates that the rationality dominates the passions, and thus the human propensity for greed can and should be rationally controlled. Laws and institutions constitute the rational self-control of these civil societies. Machiavelli answers here that this is a great misunderstanding; passions mostly characterize man and not rationality, therefore man's natural right derives from passions and not from reason. Therefore, such states may have existed<sup>37</sup> but their design is flawed because the passion of greed of the humans will push that state to expansion and if it does not do this the state itself will be forced to do it by the greedy expansion of other states, which will want to harm it by violating its vital space. Sparta, moreover, being politically stable and defensively entrenched in its naturally inaccessible territory for hundreds of years, was forced to expand under the threat of the growing Athenian power. Therefore, a state must be politically structured so as to foresee and not exclude the possibility of expansion, because, when necessity leads it to grow, it will be destroyed by being unprepared for this possibility. These findings strengthen the moral justification of a state's expansion against the harmful practice of maintenance.

c. Human things are characterized by a constant movement either towards their prosperity or their decline. Fortune is likened to a constantly moving wheel that drives the man or the state sometimes high and sometimes low. The expansion is consistent with the tragic conception of human motion. A state, in order to move from the bottom to the top, must expand, make a movement in the historical space and thus conquer its prosperity. Expansion is a forward movement, a movement towards human political well-being. The constant movement of human affairs morally justifies the policy of expansion, while on the contrary the policy of tranquility and immobility constitutes a manifest irrationality. To strive to remain still while everything is in motion is

---

<sup>36</sup> Elias Vavouras, "Machiavelli: Natural Right and Historicism," *Polis* 9, no. 3 (2021): 5-24.

<sup>37</sup> Miguel E. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 51-58.

not a prudent trait, especially when the driving force of human affairs are the invincible human passions. Every human political enterprise must go hand in hand with movement and not with tranquility.<sup>38</sup>

d. Also, the expansion of a state as a move towards its prosperity, must be done as an empire and not as a hegemony, or an otherwise hard power. Empire is different from hegemony because it uses soft power by exhausting every means of its application before being forced to resort to hard power, and that is what gives it duration over time, not the avoidance of expansion or of the expansion through hard power. This shows that the state moving towards the realization of empire does not simply fulfill the human passion of greed, but knowing the tendency of greed of human nature and the constant movement of everything succeeds in creating the maximum possible prosperity. Empire is not simply a submission to the human passion of desiring more material goods, but a rational evaluation of all historical material, i.e., human natural right, human imperfection, the constant movement of things, the beneficial imitation of historical paradigms, and the right shaping of the destiny of a civil society. The empire is the maximum possible development of a state through the knowledge and right arrangement of all human and historical parameters. The empire morally justifies expansion, while hegemony does not. The middle way of Roman expansion utilizes the mode of federation through alliances - which falls far short of becoming an empire - but also deception or the hard power of hegemony when the need arises. The state must not act subservient to human passion, but rationally evaluate human passions as a necessity that it cannot avoid. The state must see human passions as an inescapable necessity in the material of creation and shaping of history.

e. In the Machiavellian design of the empire there is no teleological motive of development, it does not mean that human nature, or human natural right, includes the human ultimate purpose or the purpose of the state. The state acts entirely subjectively in shaping history or man, it takes into account knowledge of human nature and historical parameters, yet its institutions reproduce the dominant state ideology. Machiavelli does not claim, as, for example, does Plato or the classical tradition in general, that the integrated state must fulfill the perfection of man under the objective inscribed in its essence, he simply says that there can be no movement towards the well-being of a state without state expansion at the level of empire. The Machiavellian interpretation tries to justify the means of expansion and the expansion itself as a movement of the

---

<sup>38</sup> Hörnqvist, 76-112.

civil society in history,<sup>39</sup> not to tell us that, since human nature is of this substance, the objective of the state is always the same and there is no other way of perfection. Machiavelli instead claims that there can be no perfection because man is an imperfect being plagued by vulgar passions and the state's expansion is a means of dealing with human passions. The purpose is to expand and maintain the state through the movement towards the empire regardless of the ideological parameters that characterize that empire. Machiavelli suggests a methodology for the right use of the means of domination as an empire, the right application of this methodology reveals his peculiar 'ethics.'

## References

- Ardito, Alissa M. *Machiavelli and the Modern State: The Prince, the Discourses on Livy, and the Extended Territorial Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Baluch, Faisal. "Machiavelli as Philosopher." *The Review of Politics* 80, no. 2 (2018): 289-300.
- Benner, Erica. *Machiavelli's Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Coady, Cecil A. J. "Dirty Hands." In *Reading Political Philosophy Machiavelli to Mill*, edited by Nigel Warburton, Jon Pike, and Derek Matravers, 59-66. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Del Lucchese, Filippo. *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- Drury, Santra B. "The Hidden Meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*." *History of Political Thought* 6, no. 3 (1985): 575-590.
- Fischer, Markus. "Machiavelli's Political Psychology." *The Review of Politics* 59, no. 4 (1997): 789-829.
- Forde, Steven. "Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli." *The Journal of Politics* 54, no. 2 (1992): 372-393.
- Hankins, James. "Machiavelli, Civic Humanism, and the Humanist Politics of Virtue." *Italian Culture* 32, no. 2, (2014): 98-109.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by John C. A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

---

<sup>39</sup> Alissa M. Ardito, *Machiavelli and the Modern State: The Prince, the Discourses on Livy, and the Extended Territorial Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 76-82.

Holler, Manfred J. "Niccolò Machiavelli on Power." In *Niccolò Machiavelli: History, Power, and Virtue*, edited by Leonidas Donskis, 27-48. New York: Rodopi, 2011.

Hörnqvist, Mikael. *Machiavelli and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others, Vol. I*. Edited by Allan Gillbert. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989.

Mansfield, Harvey C. Jr. "Strauss's Machiavelli." *Political Theory* 3, no. 4 (1975): 372-384.

McCormick, John P. "Of Tribunes and Tyrants: Machiavelli's Legal and Extra-Legal Modes for Controlling Elites." *Ratio Juris* 28, no. 2 (2015): 252-266.

Namazi, Rasoul. "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture." *Interpretation* 43, no. 3 (2017): 431-460.

Nye, Joseph S. Jr. *The Powers to Lead*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Pasquino, Pasquale. "Machiavelli and Aristotle: The Anatomies of the City." *History of European Ideas* 35, no. 4 (2009): 397-407.

Pocock, John G. A. "Machiavelli and Rome: The Republic as Ideal and as History." In *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, edited by John M. Najemy, 144-166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Pocock, John G. A. *Barbarism and Religion: The First Decline and Fall*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Skinner, Quentin. "Machiavelli on the Maintenance of Liberty." *Australian Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 2 (1983): 3-15.

Strauss, Leo. *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*. Edited with an introduction by Hilail Gildin. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989.

Strauss, Leo. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Vatter, Miguel E. *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2000.

Vavouras, Elias. "Machiavelli: Natural Right and Historicism." *Polis* 9, no. 3 (2021): 5-24.

Vavouras, Elias. "Natural Right and Historicism: From Thucydides to Marx." *Cogito* 8, no. 1 (2021): 7-20.

Vavouras, Elias. "The Machiavellian Reality of Leo Strauss." *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy* 12 (2022): 265-273.

Viroli, Maurizio. *The Quotable Machiavelli*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Viroli, Maurizio. "Machiavelli's Realism." *Constellations* 14, no. 4 (2007): 466-482.

Zuckert, Catherine H. *Machiavelli's Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

