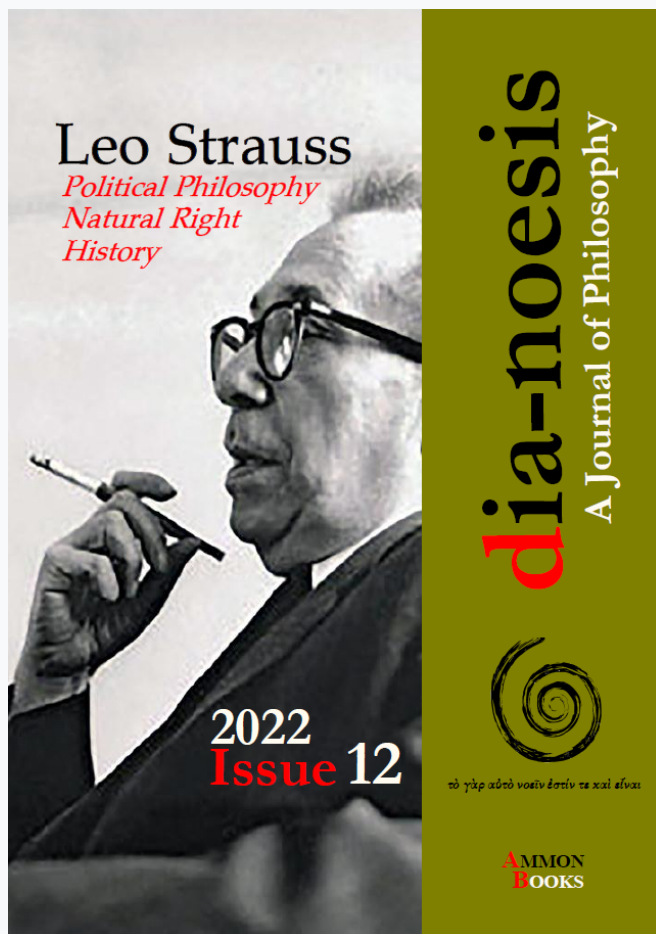


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### The Machiavellian reality of Leo Strauss

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## The Machiavellian reality of Leo Strauss

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**Abstract:** What is it that makes Machiavelli such a decisive thinker, worthy of the Straussian interpretation? For Strauss, Machiavellian theoretical achievement is that he succeeds in misleading us, in leading us through his intelligent propaganda away from philosophy or political science in the literal sense of the word. He uses his interpretation of Machiavellian thought as a means of esoteric expression of his own positions. While he states that thoughts are expressed on Machiavelli, in fact Strauss' thoughts are expressed with Machiavelli as his "speaker-mouthpiece", with the aim of returning to the point where the Machiavellian rupture began, in classical natural right. As much as we agree or disagree with the Straussian interpretation, we cannot ignore the driving force it activates in the debate over the shaping of Machiavellian reality. After all, the Strauss's analysis itself in the Machiavellian text aims at overcoming structural problems of the political thought and of the human condition in general.

**Keywords:** Leo Strauss, Machiavelli, political philosophy, political science, human nature, natural right, propaganda, historicism, chance, esoteric writing.

*What is so devilish about Machiavelli,  
what is for Strauss so inexcusable,  
is that he once lived among the great men of antiquity.  
He is a devil precisely because he was once an angel*<sup>1</sup>.

It is clearly a difficult task to discover Leo Strauss's Machiavelli. Not so much because Strauss's text about Machiavelli is difficult or secretive<sup>2</sup>, but because in Strauss's interpretation there are two philosophical currents, Machiavellian political thought and Straussian political thought, which is revealed through the analysis of Machiavellian positions. As we immerse ourself in Strauss's text we realize the existence of two philosophers who strive to prevail at the crossroads of classical political thought and modernity. Strauss tells us not only how he perceives Machiavelli, but also how we can deify or annihilate Machiavelli, but above all how we can use him as a methodological tool for interpreting political philosophy. Strauss's main work *Thoughts on Machiavelli* confirms this finding, because the author by no means promises a complete interpretation of Machiavelli, but his own positions based on Machiavellian work, an in-depth, almost platonic dialogue with him, where the end result is the question, the overwhelming defeat of one part or the use of one philosophical part by the other. As much as we agree or disagree with the Straussian interpretation, we cannot ignore the driving force it activates

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<sup>1</sup> Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 589.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mansfield H. C., Jr. "Strauss's Machiavelli", *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Nov., 1975), pp. 372-384. Pocock J. G. A., "Prophet and Inquisitor: Or, a Church Built upon Bayonets Cannot Stand: A Comment on Mansfield's "Strauss's Machiavelli". *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Nov., 1975), pp. 385-401. McShea R. J., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli", *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Dec., 1963), pp. 782-797. Guodong Zh., "A Critical Interpretation of Leo Strauss' *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", January 2019,

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330620699>. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), pp. 575-590. Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, pp. 431-460.

in the debate over the shaping of Machiavellian reality<sup>3</sup>. After all, the Strauss's analysis itself in the Machiavellian text aims at overcoming structural problems of political thought and of the human condition in general<sup>4</sup>.

### **Machiavelli's philosophical relationship with the classics**

Machiavelli's association with his classical origins cannot be hidden anywhere. In many parts of his work, he emphasizes the beneficial contact for him with the ancient texts and does not hesitate to characterize this contact as the top moment of bliss for him<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Machiavelli's most famous work, *The Prince*, belongs to the long tradition of *Mirrors of Princes*, beginning from the *Protreptics* of Isocrates, while the *Discourses* envision a return to the state of the political excellence in Rome. According to Strauss, there is nothing that Machiavelli has said, which has not been said before from the classics. In fact, a rediscovery of the ancient Greek thought under new terms is being attempted, a reconstruction<sup>6</sup>. This reconstruction is not an easy task, even the imitation of ancient patterns is an almost impossible task, but even more an in-depth understanding of them. What sharply increases the difficulty of the task is the persuasive propaganda of the Christian religion, which makes inaccessible the actual development of the classical conception of the virtue and bliss. The Christian religion degrades man through humility, while the ancient Greek religion elevates man through the perfection of reasonable ability and natural strength, and in general with what can make man capable here and now.

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<sup>3</sup> Germino D., "Blasphemy and Leo Strauss's Machiavelli", *Review of Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 1: 146–56, p.146.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.14.

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli N., *Letter to Francesco Vettori. The Prince: Letter to Lorenzo de' Medici*.

<sup>6</sup> Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 434.

Machiavelli acts as a continuator of the classics, communicates with them and tries, like them, to find a solution to the political problem. Its origin is common to the classics, the human nature, a factor that remains unchanged in the constant flow of time<sup>7</sup>. What changes are the times and chance, the human nature and the manifestations of good and evil remain the same. It also inherits from the classics the idea of man as a being with a dual nature of rationality and passions. The conflict between rationality and passions is maintained within man, regardless of whether in the Machiavellian anthropological point of view the dominance of passions is overwhelming. In a paradoxical way, perhaps, the Machiavellian ending is purely classical. He proposes as an optimal state formation a mixed state, an aristocratic democracy, just as the great classics, Thucydides, Plato (in the *Laws*) and Aristotle, and even Isocrates do. Strauss at every opportunity emphasizes Machiavelli's failure to transcend the classical political scheme. The Machiavellian goal is to recreate the old correct, ethical and political modes and orders with a corrective elaboration, more effective and adapted to the historical context. If Machiavellian beginning and ending are almost identical to the classics, what is it that differentiates Machiavellian political thought? Is the Machiavellian turn to modernity due to a misinterpretation of the classics, is it simply a methodological error or a deliberate revolutionary, a subversive act? According to Strauss, Machiavelli is well acquainted with ancient thought, he is a communicant, an initiate thinker in the classical tradition, and deliberately attempts to overthrow it, and this act of deconstruction is tantamount to the birth of the first wave of modernity<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 306, 308-309. Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Giddin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 584.

### The Machiavellian *rupture*

Everything in Machiavelli starts from the eternity of human nature. The Machiavellian thoughts are always in force, because human nature remains the same and therefore historical or political events will be repeated the same or almost the same, as long as human nature remains stable<sup>9</sup>. The starting point of Machiavellian analysis is the same as classical political philosophy. The classics believed that the human substance determines the human goal. The element that separates man from other living beings is rationality. The supreme human goal is a state where rational ability prevails over the irrational passions. The perfect man is the supreme rational man, the philosopher, while the perfected civil society is the state, where rationalism holds the reins of the political governance, that is the state ruled by the most rational people, the philosophers. The goal of political philosophy is the improvement of human nature, its evolution from the point of absolute domination of the passions into a state of domination of rationalism. Man as an individual or the city as a political entity can improve, develop rationality within their nature. Also, there can be no city without men, but neither can be a man without the natural matrix of the city. The city is the natural matrix in which man can develop the element of rationality. The goal of classical political philosophy is the improvement of man and civil society through individual or collective virtue, i.e., through the application of philosophical principles about man in the political reality.

Machiavelli does not seem to question anywhere the inseparable connection of individual-civil society. At no point in the Machiavellian text that is meant an apolitical man - as in Hobbes, for example - who has no need for political matrix. Still, he doesn't seem to question the classics' findings about human nature and integration. At no point does he attempt to strike with logical arguments the positions of the ancient philosophers on virtue and bliss. However, Machiavelli does

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Thuc. 3. 82.2: *γινόμενα μὲν καὶ αἰεὶ ἐσόμενα, ἕως ἂν ἡ αὐτὴ φύσις ἀνθρώπων ᾗ ἀλλὰ τοῖς εἶδεσι διηλλαγμένα.*

not hesitate to cut the classical philosophical model in two parts. His harsh critique of morality, which he sees as a brake on political development and implementation, although aimed primarily at the Christian faith, strikes at classical political philosophy. The human essence and the human goal are separated by its intervention. He rejects the classic political scheme as unrealistic; he does not tell us that it is wrong, but that the possibility of achieving it is extremely limited. The coincidence of political philosophy and political governance is not entirely impossible, but almost impossible or accidental. Machiavelli's intention is to seek a political order that is highly probable or entirely feasible<sup>10</sup>. At the moment of the Machiavellian challenge to the realization of the human goal as a process of completion of human nature, the rupture with the classical utopian shape is now a fact<sup>11</sup>.

We are therefore moving on to a new political plan, where the concept of virtue has been completely differentiated. Virtue or bliss is no longer associated with a proper condition of the human soul. There is no Machiavellian reference to the term *soul* in connection with human virtue or bliss<sup>12</sup>, because virtue ceases to be a proper arrangement of human nature under the domination of rationalism. The virtue of the ruler is the domination over the subjects and over the historical-political conditions and the subjugation of chance as a woman who resists, while the goodness of the subjects is the obedience to the orders of the political government. For the subjects there is no virtue, only submissive goodness, commensurate with their obedience to the religious propaganda of the unarmed prophet Jesus<sup>13</sup>. The virtue of the ruler can mutate depending

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<sup>10</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 299-300.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, pp. 442-443.

<sup>13</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p.

on the circumstances into goodness or evil, while the goodness of the subjects equals obedience to this goodness or even this extreme evil; this for Machiavelli is completely indifferent.

### **The imperfect human material**

According to Strauss, the Machiavellian findings are based on a pessimistic anthropology. Humans are evil by nature or, as an ancient sage once said, the most of them are evil<sup>14</sup>, deprived of the ability to complete their nature. What the classics regarded as natural perfection, i.e., the domination of rationalism over the passions, is something completely impossible. Within human nature the dominance of passions over rationalism is overwhelming. Man is not defined by the noble rationalism, but by his vile passions, he is a slave of his natural passions, which keep him captive to eternal imperfection<sup>15</sup>. The humanistic goals of the classical political thought about the possibility of human improvement are de facto impossible, because there is no philosophical way of overcoming the passions for the human majority. Human material is inherently imperfect, it cannot be improved<sup>16</sup>. Trying to create an ideal state with the imperfect human material is like trying to build a building with defective materials. The failure of our venture would be absolutely sure. So, if we cannot improve human material, what can we do? Dominance over man through the control of his most humble passions is Machiavelli's answer. There is, therefore, a diversion of political thought from the classical, humanistic direction of human improvement to the modern, cynical

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301. Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 438.

<sup>14</sup> Diog. Laert., *Bias of Priene*, 1.88: *οἱ πλείστοι κακοί*.

<sup>15</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Strauss L., "*The Three Waves of Modernity*", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 85.

direction of overwhelming domination over man. Man is no longer understood as a natural substance that can be improved, can be perfected, but as matter, as an imperfect object that must be controlled.

Politics is no longer understood as political custody of human beings and the politician is not the custodian of a human political ensemble, but politics is now management of things and the politician is the manager of the human material. The success of political implementation is no longer judged by whether the political man managed to make better than it was even one of the human beings under his political care, i.e., whether he managed to subdue bodily passions to human rationality, but by the extent to which he succeeded to control his subjects through their nature, through the imperfection of their passions, i.e., whether he managed to exploit them by serving a selfishly intended goal. Humans in Machiavellian design are the material for the realization of the selfish, subjectively intended goal of an authoritarian political artist, who shapes human matter at will. The most powerful human passion on which political governance must be based is fear. The causing of the passion of fear depends solely on the power of government, while for example the passion of love for the ruler or the state depends on the human themselves, which makes it less controllable. Of course, the fear of the use of power can create a negative image for the ruling authority, to clearly reveal the imposition of hard power, but without the possibility of causing fear no political authority can be imposed or maintained, fear is the guarantee of the application of the political power, because it is the most powerful human passion. The exploitation of the other human passions is legitimate as long as there is no need to use fear and thus the image of the ruler or the state is not affected, in fact in the depths of every political coercion is the fundamental human passion of fear, the fear of subjects is the cornerstone of any civil society<sup>17</sup> -

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<sup>17</sup> Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 437, 438. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p.582.

and as Hobbes would later add, using this Machiavellian thinking, the most powerful of human passions, or the fear itself generally, is the fear of the violent death.

### **The conscious degradation of the *political goal***

Controlling humans is easier, or at least more feasible, than improving them. The control of human nature through nature itself is more feasible than its improvement. According to Machiavelli, the failure of classical thought does not lie in its rational or theoretical inadequacy, but on the contrary to the very high, almost utopian goals it sets. The classics have very high expectations of a being who in the end proves to be inadequate by nature. Ancient thinkers act correctly, like capable archers<sup>18</sup> who turn their bows high and set high goals, but these goals can rarely be achieved. The Machiavellian solution to the problem is the conscious degradation of the goal, to ensure the success of the political goal. With the degradation of the human goal, with the rupture of the binding relation human essence-human goal of the classical design, the level of political philosophy is necessarily degraded, but a new political continent is discovered<sup>19</sup>, where the political application acquires a completely open horizon under the influence of the political subjectivity of the political ruler. Politics acquires a remarkable autonomy and neutrality. The successful outcome of the political governance is not judged by the moral and political improvement of the human parts it oversees, but by the decisive control it exercises over them by serving whatever subjective goal the dominant political order sets.

In addition, Strauss notes that Machiavellian, conscious degradation of the goal of man and of civil society aims to limit the cruelty in the application of political power. As closer we live to the human reality, so less the need for hard power is

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<sup>18</sup> Machiavelli N., *The Prince*, VI.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 39.

minimized, because the political expectations are lower. When we leave people at a low level of their imperfect nature, it does not take much effort to control them. The degradation of the political level degrades the necessity of violence. The high expectations of the classics for man are transformed with Machiavelli into a peculiar utilitarianism<sup>20</sup>, aiming at the maximum possible benefit with the low-quality material that we have to manage. Politics with Machiavelli has no long-term virtuous goals, but short-term utilitarian expectations.

### The control of *chance*

For Strauss, one of the most important Machiavellian innovations is the control or reduction of the factor of chance in the political field. According to the classics, the coincidence of political power and philosophy, although it is the best political condition and in accordance with human nature, is at the discretion of chance. For philosophers to gain political power and succeed in making the political community virtuous and blissful is a condition of unique chance. For Machiavelli, this condition is a hopeful dream. The project of the overwhelming control of the human passions by the rationalization of the political authority is something completely improbable. The fluidity of chance thrives more on the fluidity of human passions. Humans suffer when they are unhappy but feel full, they "bored" when they are truly blissful and want to fall back into misery. Investing in humans' well-being is like building on sand. The nature of human things is tragic, it goes abruptly from prosperity to decline, when chance differentiates its intentions. The control of chance<sup>21</sup> is equivalent to the control of human passions and the vigilance for the constant differentiation of circumstances and at the same time the

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<sup>20</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 41.

adaptation of the sovereign power to them. Control of passions does not mean their rational restriction for the benefit of the humans, but knowledge of their vileness and their unhindered manifestation for the benefit of the political ruler. Humans are captives of their passions and so they must remain, in order to limit the random change of circumstances and to establish their control or exploitation. The qualitative or moral formation or evolution of man has no place in Machiavellian design or at least is surrounded by ostentatious indifference. Man has no space for natural improvement and that is something absolutely sad, but we must all agree on that. On the contrary, the means of controlling human passions are unlimited and so we can limit the tragedy or chance of political things. This implies the omnipotence of man compared to the power of nature or chance. Man becomes the absolute ruler of nature and chance. The limitation of human goal by an inherent natural design ceases to exist, man can subjectively define for himself whatever goal he desires. No teleology binds on human activity and human goals, man's selfish domination over nature, and consequently over the chance, which comes from nature, is overwhelming and irreversible.

### **The Machiavellian *propaganda***

Strauss also sees another Machiavellian contribution to the concept of propaganda. Machiavelli completely rejected the contribution of Christianity to political planning, retaining only the influence of propaganda<sup>22</sup>. The use of propaganda by the Christian religion was exemplary, it managed to achieve wonderful results only through propaganda<sup>23</sup>. A de facto successful prophet is an armed prophet, such as Moses, who can enforce his teaching by force. However, Christ, though an unarmed prophet, accomplished much more than the armed

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<sup>22</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.173.

<sup>23</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 45.

prophets through propaganda, persuasion, and the charm of his sermons. Machiavelli imitates the unarmed propaganda of Christ and of the Christian religion, in order to consolidate his teaching. He introduces a completely new political teaching, which is based on propaganda and, just like Christian propaganda, aims to establish radically new modes and orders<sup>24</sup> that will determine the human condition for many years. The hidden or overt blasphemy<sup>25</sup> of his proclamations, their cynical imprinting and their coercive charm achieves exactly what Christianity, i.e., bloodlessly dominates, flooding the souls of the humans and especially of the young people. What Machiavelli ultimately suggests as an innovation in the history of philosophy is not his own teaching, which pre-exists in ancient thought, but the attractive and honest way in which it is uttered so that it can influence its recipients. The ancient thinkers - even Socrates, Plato or Aristotle - suggested Machiavellian immorality from the beginning, but in disguise, with textual methods and rhetoric mouthpieces, under the cloak of virtue and morality, they did not dare to proclaim it. Only the initiates were able to perceive it. Machiavelli, on the other hand, is the first who publicly expose this horrific doctrine of the human political condition under his own name, and this externalization is the reason for his disarmament success. Machiavelli overturns classical political thought because he externalizes a teaching that until then was esoteric, hidden<sup>26</sup>.

Machiavelli's target, the recipients of his propaganda and attractive blasphemy, were the young people, who with their unwavering determination will consolidate in the political field the new modes and orders that his teaching evangelizes. Reconciling young people with blasphemy means the

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<sup>24</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 306-307.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 577-578, 581.

unhindered questioning of current morality, i.e., motivating them to make forbidden and criminal thoughts. Machiavellian blasphemy is a form of corruption of determined men in order to change things. Young men need to move away from the feminine, passive teachings of virtue and inaugurate the decisive power formation of human material. This formation will not aim at passive Christian love, but at man's terror before God. It is utopian to believe that people can love one another, instead we must instill in them a fear of sovereign power commensurate with how they feel about God. Human nature is more susceptible of terror than of love, and the state must imitate this finding of Christian teaching. The ideology envisioned by Machiavellian thought is based on the fear of the humans in the face of the political power as the only guarantee of human control<sup>27</sup>. Machiavelli is fully aware of the function of the political propaganda he suggests, he knows that it will be dominant for many centuries, he senses the modern political horizon that he opens. Its purpose was not only to motivate the determined young men to liberate Italy under a single state entity, but to consolidate its fascinating political propaganda under the banner of blasphemy and cynicism. According to Strauss Machiavelli is an excellent teacher of blasphemy, the charming and enticing effect of his teaching is not so much due to its philosophical importance but to its shocking character.

Machiavelli is the unarmed prophet who understood that the persuasive propaganda as soft power is far more effective than political philosophy or science in the classical sense of the word. The Enlightenment begins with Machiavellian propaganda. The Enlightenment offered by Machiavelli aimed at the complete liberation of man from the classical binding teaching. What determines political success is not political science, as conceived by the ancients, but a coercive ideology that directs things to the purpose of its inspirer. Machiavelli wanted his work to inspire the few and decisive, but to drastically affect the majority of humans for many centuries.

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<sup>27</sup> Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 583.

Responding to Plato, he claims that the only coincidence of political philosophy and political power can be caused by the influence of propaganda, which he suggests<sup>28</sup>. But propaganda is directly related to persuasion, to faith, and a philosophy based on faith is no longer a philosophy<sup>29</sup>. From this Machiavellian deviation from truth to faith, according to Strauss, emerges the modernity and the decline of Western thought. But if we reverse the terms, we will see that Machiavelli incorporates in his political teaching the ideological function of Christianity, in this sense modernity does not essentially begin with Machiavelli, but with Christianity. Machiavelli completes the modern project of the Christian faith versus philosophical truth in the vast majority of people. While Plato expels poets from his ideal state because they falsify truth, Machiavelli expels philosophy from the state, because the truth and the state are incompatible terms. The Machiavellian state is based on propaganda and not on the truth, political governance is based on authoritarian artistic creation and not on philosophical truth. The political men that Machiavelli envisions are more poets than philosophers. Machiavelli, by making political philosophy public, distorts it into a low-level ideology or propaganda, because the many people cannot grasp the higher philosophical meanings, and therefore what they are convinced of is not the rational conception of political science, but a pleasing belief or opinion, which awakens their passions, so that they may follow it meekly. In fact, the more philosophy is spread among many, the more the truth is distorted into faith, i.e., the more democratic a society is, the more philosophy takes the form of propaganda. The enlightenment of many that stems from Machiavellian thought and is the banner of the movement of modernity, is for Strauss the condemnation of man, because in order to bring the truth to the measures of the vulgar people, we must also degrade it, to bring it down to their level and

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<sup>28</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.173.

<sup>29</sup> Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 433.

consequently to turn it into a plausible ideology. Machiavelli is a fallen angel, i.e., a cunning devil, because he was one of the virtuous ancients and preferred to fall into the wickedness of the masses<sup>30</sup>, where superiority, the value of every truth or every way of life is not validated by rationalism or science, but by subjectivity in the field of history. Machiavelli's evil, after all, lies in the loss of human goal or, in other words, in icy indifference to man.

### The problem of *esoteric writing*<sup>31</sup>

The Straussian idea of the Enlightenment is based on the issue of esoteric writing. According to Strauss, the ancient Greek philosophical texts are structured on levels of esoterism. There is information that is external, ie the meaning of the text is the same as the meaning of its understanding, while on the contrary there are points where the meaning is hidden, esoteric, so that it is perceived only by a few specialized experts. This is because the ancient writers avoided directly confronting the prevailing moral order and either cleverly concealed the provocative meanings of their theories or used "speakers-mouthpieces" to make it appear that this blasphemy did not belong to them. This esoteric tradition is known to Machiavelli, who can fully understand the hidden meaning of

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 575, 587, 588.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Strauss L., *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1952. Mansfield H. C., Jr., "Strauss's Machiavelli", *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Nov., 1975), pp. 372-384. Pocock J. G. A., "Prophet and Inquisitor: Or, a Church Built upon Bayonets Cannot Stand: A Comment on Mansfield's "Strauss's Machiavelli". *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Nov., 1975), pp. 385-401. McShea R. J., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli", *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Dec., 1963), pp. 782-797. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), pp. 575-590. Drury, "The Esoteric Philosophy of Leo Strauss", *Political Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Aug., 1985), pp. 315-337. Gunnell J. G., "The Myth of the Tradition", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Mar., 1978), pp. 122-134.

the ancient texts. In fact, the "devilish" Machiavellian teaching itself is not something new, it is part of the occult meaning of the old philosophical books. What Machiavelli is doing is breaking with the great tradition of esoteric writing and exposing what was previously hidden. This publication of esoteric teaching, which was addressed to a few reasonable people, results firstly in the creation of Machiavellian attractive propaganda, because people, and especially young people, surprised by this blasphemous content are inevitably attracted to it, secondly in the reduction of the level of philosophical meaning, because to be the higher philosophical meaning understood by people of low level of rationality, it must be simplified, hence to be degraded and vulgarized.

Machiavelli for Strauss consciously degrades not only the political goal but also the philosophy itself. Making public the philosophical meaning cuts it off from the refined philosophical process and makes it a simple ideology at the lowest level of the masses. But the masses do not perceive the truth, but only what they are convinced of, so philosophy from a supreme activity of finding the truth is reduced to a simple ideology. Strauss cannot forgive Machiavelli for this popular enlightenment, this desecration of the high philosophical meaning, this methodically vicious massification of philosophy - especially of political philosophy - and considers this rupture with the classical tradition as the beginning of the movement of European Enlightenment but also of the modernity. Machiavelli is a devil, or a fallen angel, because he consciously decides to deconstruct philosophy and turn it into an ideology, which seems to be a beneficial enlightenment for the masses, but results in the loss of human goal and the decline of Western Thought. When philosophy is transformed into an ideology, every philosophical thesis is equal to any other, just as any attitude of life is the same as any other, because the concept of value is nullified. Relativism and nihilism are emphatically present in this case.

Also, Strauss being at the same time exponent and user of the technique of esoteric writing acts as an ancient wise man in the age of modernity. He uses his interpretation of Machiavellian thought as a means of esoteric expression of his

own positions. While he states that thoughts are expressed on Machiavelli, in fact Strauss' thoughts are expressed with Machiavelli as his "speaker-mouthpiece", with the aim of returning to the point where the Machiavellian rupture began, in classical natural right. In fact, the critique of Machiavelli conceals other positions that Strauss cannot express in public, such as the critique of the Christian religion and of the structure of the modern state as factors that alienate man from the perspective of bliss.

### *The ideal state*

For Machiavelli, classical political philosophy led to a completely wrong political system, not because it was inconsistent with its philosophical or scientific findings, but because it ended in utopia, an inaccessible or completely impossible illusion. This took place because the classical political model suggested the occupation of political offices on the basis of virtue, i.e., on the basis of the natural perfection of man. The differentiation of value of the political members about the occupation of political power is based on the degree of their virtuous perfection or improvement, and this condition is the most important objective factor of the differentiation about value and the selection in the exercise of sovereign power. Machiavelli characterizes as absurd the virtuous or natural objectivity of ancient Greek political thought and opposes that political parties should rise to political positions based on the objective goals that are really and timelessly pursued by all civil societies.

Strauss notes that the Machiavellian way of implementing politics not only consciously lowers the political level but also the social one. The attempt to deliberately lower the political level<sup>32</sup>, in order to make a political class possible or certain and to reduce the uncertainty of chance, also entails the social

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<sup>32</sup> Strauss L., "The Three Waves of Modernity", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 87.

level<sup>33</sup>. The downgrading of the criteria of the human value also degrades the anthropological or humanistic criteria of the society. The degradation of the public horizon also entails the degradation of the private sphere, as the criteria of the human value are determined by the subjectivity of the goals of each society. In this light Machiavelli condemns individual perfection or bliss within the civil society on the basis of the natural perfection of the human being. It also rejects human bliss as a form of proper state of soul. Virtue does not arise as a perfection of human nature or as the right order of the human soul, but as an adaptation to the social context, to the goals of each society. The virtue of the citizen as part of the civil society is tantamount to an addiction to positive law. The virtuous or moral citizen is understood as a reflection of positive law, which defined by the sovereign power. The social status with Machiavellian intervention inevitably falls, because there is no indisputable criterion of virtue or bliss, but the political parties feel happy as subordinates of their passions and their only obligation is the absolute identification with the positive law, while the political sovereignty experiences the absolute bliss under the actual fulfillment of its subjectivity.

Aristotle noted that human virtue exists only politically in relation to other people, i.e., in comparison with others, one cannot excel in virtue, if there are no others to compare with them and surpass them<sup>34</sup>. On the contrary, according to Strauss, Machiavelli argues that virtue for man is defined by other people as expression of the dominant way of life in society. Virtue is not the transcendence of others but the assimilation with them, with the laws and morals expressed by the civil society. But who determines the dominant moral way of society, who is the educator of the humans, their moral educator? The ruler or the ruling class as creators or administrators of the institutional process of the state are the

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Strauss L., “What is political philosophy?”, Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Giddin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 41, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1103b: οὕτω δὴ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀρετῶν ἔχει· πράττοντες γὰρ τὰ ἐν τοῖς συναλλάγμασι τοῖς πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους γινόμεθα οἱ μὲν δίκαιοι οἱ δὲ ἄδικοι.

educators, the moral shapers of the civil society. But the moral or legal rules they transmit are based on some earlier ethical or scientific basis, is there anyone who trains the rulers in virtue? Clearly not, the founder of Rome was a fratricide and therefore the ethics of the civil society can be based on immorality<sup>35</sup>. The founders of civil society, those who establish conventional ethics, are themselves immoral. For Strauss, the morality of the civil society emanating from legal force is not self-created<sup>36</sup>, but is based on the immorality of rulers, morality is created by the immorality or rather by the unbridled subjectivity of the authority. This means that with Machiavelli the rules of human virtue are determined by the subjectivity of the sovereign power. The common good is not determined by the rules of objectivity of the virtue, but the subjectively considered common good determines the rules of the virtue.

So, the Machiavellian ideal state does not exist? Is there no limit to the immorality or otherwise uncontrollable subjectivity of morality imposed by the sovereign on political parties? To answer this question, we must investigate the objective goals, which set all civil societies. The virtue of the society is determined by a general evaluation of the goals of each society. Virtue is not defined by human nature or the nature of the civil society, as the classics would note, but by the observation of the goals, which set all the kinds of societies. We do not research the excellent society as a hypothesis or as a reality, in order to then determine the goals that imperfect human societies will set, but we research the necessarily imperfect civil societies, in order to determine what goals they set most of the times. The goal of the civil society does not derive from the essence of man as an individual or a social-political being, but from the experience of political things and from careful sociological observation. Strauss finds that Machiavelli achieves

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<sup>35</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 301. Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 438.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 41.

some of the objective goals that characterize any civil society, and their successful execution defines the society that fulfilled them as not ideal, but as integrated in the light of a proper functionality. These goals or objectives are:

1. *freedom from foreign domination and from despotic rule,*
2. *stability or rule of law,*
3. *prosperity (security of life, property and honor of every citizen, the continuous increase of wealth and power of the state),*
4. *glory or power (ie empire)* <sup>37</sup>.

Whatever is done within society to achieve these goals is a virtuous action, making this society and its political parts participants in virtue. Virtue is the set of political actions that contribute to the achievement of these goals. The common good is defined by the attainment of these goals, and anything that promotes these goals is considered as good. By this syllogism any means is justified for the accomplishment of these political goals<sup>38</sup>. The Machiavellian state emerges from the goals it sets, the means used by the sovereign power are legitimate, as long as they fulfill those goals. Virtue is nothing but voluntary or involuntary compliance with the goals of the civil society or otherwise with the collective selfishness of the state. What is written in Machiavelli as patriotism is nothing but the justification of any means of achieving collective selfishness. Machiavellian virtue is ultimately an absolute identification of the political parties with the collective selfishness of the society, which of course is defined by the immorality of the state. The immorality of the state, which uses every means to promote its goals, determines the morality of the citizens. The difference between the state or the ruler from the common criminals, is that the latter do not determine the

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<sup>37</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.256. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 42.

positive law, so that they can protect themselves. The difference between the political ruler and the common criminal is not the evil that distinguishes them both, but that the criminal is constantly threatened by positive law, while the ruler is protected by it as its creator or administrator<sup>39</sup>. This is for Strauss the Machiavellian conception of the ideal or integrated state.

In addition, the state is synonymous with coercion, i.e., the soft or hard power. Humans are by nature evil, incapable of perfection, and prone to unbridled individualism and greed, so it is necessary to force them by all means to become virtuous, i.e., to align themselves with the goals of collective selfishness. The state should force citizens to be virtuous or moral, while virtue or morality is defined by its will. Machiavelli paradoxically believes that the goodness of humans is created by the evil or the good will of the state or the ruler. Nothing prevents the sovereign from unfolding its evil, i.e., its individualism and greed, and using the humans as part of the state in the pursuit of its selfish ends. The character of a civil society is essentially determined by the dominant political element within it or its ruler.

Here Strauss wonders if there can be a safeguard that restrains the sovereign's uncontrollable malice or selfishness. Can the egoism, the individualism and the greed of the political power, i.e., the culmination of human evil, give way to the benefit of the humans, who has under its control? The ruler's desire for glory is the guarantee of his interest in the political body<sup>40</sup>. Only if the civil society achieves its stated goals can the sovereign power realize its selfish ambitions. The passion for glory turns the evil of the sovereign into an interest for his

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<sup>39</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 42. Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 444. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p.577.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 42.

subjects, because the sovereign has a selfish interest in defending the existence of society, i.e., his work, his creation. Without civil society, the sovereign's ambitions cannot be realized. The better the objective goals of a society are realized, the more the chances of creating a glorious state and of apotheosis of the sovereign increase. What is remarkable about the relationship between the private and the public is that individual greed depends on the maintenance of civil society. Even extreme tyranny as an expression of the absolute greed of one over the many presupposes the existence of the political state. The more prosperous the civil society is, the more the greed and individualism of the sovereign can be satisfied.

Strauss sees that this Machiavellian conception of politics leads to the strengthening of the idea of the state through institutions. Institutions are essentially modes or orders of enforcement. They impose what the sovereign authority considers as justice to the subjects. An institution is successful when it makes an attempt at injustice completely unprofitable. The power of institutions is extraordinary, because they can shape human defective material in a certain direction through coercion. Only the state as a creator of modes of enforcement can give human wickedness some perspective. Trust in state institutions as a way of human formation is an important Machiavellian contribution. Man is constantly shaped as a character, but only the enforcement through state institutions can meet this demanding endeavor. The shifting of the emphasis of the political teaching from morality to the effectiveness of political institutions is Machiavelli's achievement<sup>41</sup>. The state becomes the most important of all things, no goal or value exceeds the will of the state or the preservation of the state, i.e., patriotism. But while any value can be based on scientific or rational terms, the will of the state depends on the subjectivity of the sovereign. Placing the value of the state above any value or truth is a structural feature of modernity. What in the classics was the supreme human end, the perfection of man's rational abilities, and the exercise of the

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<sup>41</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 43.

rule of rationality in the civil society, is replaced in Machiavelli by the supreme purpose of the existence and maintenance of the state. Every abominable means, every abominable action is justified in pursuit of this highest political goal<sup>42</sup>.

In conclusion, Machiavelli's goal is to establish a mixed constitution, like that almost universally suggested in the past by the ancients. An aristocratic democracy, where the newly formed ruling class would be similar to the patricians of ancient Rome, but would be radically different from them. It would be a new kind of rulers imbued with the Machiavellian teaching and determined to establish new modes and orders under the successful implementation of political propaganda through institutions<sup>43</sup>. The certainty of this proposed regime lies in the degradation of political goals and in the unshakable faith in the institutions of the state. Strauss recognizes through Machiavelli's reading that in every democracy there is a conflicting tendency between the powerful and the people. The powerful want to exploit and oppress the people to satisfy their selfish aspirations, while the people want to limit the oppression that exists. There is no essential difference between a sovereign power in a democracy and a ruler in a monarchy in terms of their selfish pursuits to the detriment of the many. Their motives for the oppression of the many are common. The inevitable solution to this constant class struggle, to this incompatibility of the private good with the public good, is the imperial expansion to the detriment of other civil societies, so that this public expansion satisfies as much as possible the private expansion or greed. Every democracy as it develops must know that it will inevitably engage in a policy of imperialist magnification, because only this way out reduces the impasse between the private and the public<sup>44</sup>. The mixed state that Machiavelli proposes is the intermediate solution

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 585.

<sup>43</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.234-236, 256, 269.

between two conflicting ends, the common good and the private good. Most people condemn violence and fraud as a means to an end for the private good, while declaring their unequivocal approval when it comes to the satisfaction of the public good. Machiavellian political virtue or ideal political situation (as a right measure between two harmful extremes, of the extreme private individualism or of the extreme public individualism) occurs where the greed of the ruling power through violence or fraud against the many is limited, while its application is maximum to the detriment of other civil societies as a satisfaction of public individualism. We walk on purely Machiavellian paths, as the goodness of the means depends on the choice of goals, i.e., the private or public good.

With this view, according to Strauss, could be given to Machiavelli the title of political philosopher in the classical sense of the word, because Machiavelli, just like the ancient Greek philosophers, tries to find an ideal political order, an ideal state. The problem here is that Machiavelli in *The Prince* assumes the ideal exercise of political power in a purely monarchical state, while in the *Discourses* he ends up in a mixed state with democratic character. Strauss considers that *The Prince* proposes the Machiavellian methodology for the creation of a new political order, while in the *Discourses* it is analyzed how this new political reality can be consolidated through the institutions. Maintaining a state is a more difficult task than creating it<sup>45</sup>.

On the other hand, any title of political philosopher could well have removed from Machiavelli, because at the end what he is proposing is not a political philosophy or science of knowledge of the human essence and determination of bliss, but a political methodology of subjective control of man, which leads in historicism and relativism<sup>46</sup>. Machiavelli's thought emerges from the classical substratum of natural right, the human nature, and ends up proposing a mixed ideal

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<sup>45</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 304.

<sup>46</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.15.

constitution<sup>47</sup>, hence morphologically is similar to the character of classical political thought. But it differs substantially from it, because the Machiavellian thought is methodological and not scientific, and in the actual outcome of this political methodology, which justifies historicism under the decisive dominance of subjective power in historical aspects. For the ancient Greek philosophers, a well-organized state is a prerequisite, a means to the attainment of human perfection, while for Machiavelli on the contrary the powerful state of any quality becomes the supreme human goal. Politics - i.e., the relationship of domination and submission - through a means of human bliss, becomes the goal of man.

### **The first wave of modernity**

Under these conditions Machiavelli is considered by Strauss as the cornerstone, as the beginning of the first wave of modernity. The founding act of the first modern wave was the overthrow of every teleological conception of man<sup>48</sup>. Human nature and human goal are not governed by any inseparable relationship, which leads to a specific version of bliss. Human nature is not determined by the rationality and the innate sociability, but by the omnipotent passions. Man does not occupy any important place in the natural universe, nor does he excel in other living beings because of his rational character. On the contrary, it differs from other living beings because it can dominate the nature. Man is no longer the measure of all things, but becomes the sovereign of all things<sup>49</sup>. He can now, by controlling nature and limiting chance, decisively regulate his fate, without interrupting his course in the face of a natural

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 39.

<sup>48</sup> Strauss L., "The Three Waves of Modernity", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 85.

<sup>49</sup> Strauss L., "The Three Waves of Modernity", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 85.

correctness or necessity. The liberation of man from a prescribed natural purpose and the unimpeded domination of nature are the beginning of modernity. Machiavelli gives man the absolute freedom to determine his own future, neither chance nor nature can stop his uncontrollable course. Enlightenment, according to Strauss, begins with the Machiavellian degradation of human goal and with the complete control of nature and chance. Human freedom arises from the moment when nature is not considered as a model of correctness, but as an enemy, a chaos that must be tamed. In nature there is no order and correctness, but chaos and randomness, which must be brought under control by human intervention. By the same argument, civil society is not the natural matrix of human integration and bliss, but a human creation completely controlled by the human factor. The purpose of the civil society is authoritarily controlled by its creator, i.e., human subjectivity<sup>50</sup>.

With these data of the dynamic domination of everything from the first wave of modernity, Strauss emphasizes that the clarification of Machiavellian thought is not an easy task, and this is because with Machiavelli's intervention, with the peculiar enlightenment that he started, the political terminology was completely differentiated, in the sense that the meanings of the words have now changed content. Terms such as monarchy, democracy, ruler, people or virtue do not have the same meaning as their classic version. From Machiavelli onwards all these terms are signified by the power of enforcement and not by the order of each constitution. What matters is who is prosperous at the expense of the other, one ruler at the expense of the many or the many at the expense of the few. The difference between an optimal democracy and a criminal tyranny is not a difference of form, but a difference in the degree of oppression of the many by the selfishness of the sovereign power<sup>51</sup>. Virtue is identified with the unimpeded

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<sup>50</sup> Strauss L., "The Three Waves of Modernity", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 88.

<sup>51</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 278.

imposition of subjective power in politics. Everything else, like the concept of the constitution, is just ideology or propaganda, persuasive plausible images, which promote the selfishness of the sovereign. Institutions are also a means of promoting the power and shaping of human political material. Human virtue, i.e., the best man and the best political order, is signified by its power of realization, value is identified with the power of imposition on others. It is a disastrous mistake to read Machiavelli in the literal sense of political and moral terms. The shocking character of his writing stems from our obsession. Machiavelli's political methodology does not be different because of the form of government, but only adapts to the circumstances. It resembles a chameleon or the mythical Proteus, it has the appearance of democracy, oligarchy or monarchy, where times demand it, but its essential nature is the same, the power of subjective enforcement by any means to others. Its goal is to maintain power in political situations by all means. Machiavelli's teaching is not about finding the best political order, but about modes and means of enforcing for the maintenance of any political order. This is the Machiavellian Enlightenment that has indelibly marked modernity<sup>52</sup>.

### **Is there a concept of *natural right* in Machiavelli?**

As we saw Machiavelli dispute the classical natural right and pave the way for modernity, or what is called modern natural right. Classical natural right, as has been said, had its beginnings and its end in human nature, man cannot be understood outside the rules conveyed by his essence and can perceive them through rationalization. Man's destiny is his natural perfection and therefore the full validation of natural right. Machiavellian intervention has no different origin. It is based on the research of human substance, on the discovery of human nature. Just as classical philosophy arises from the study of the deeper essence of beings, so Machiavelli bases his

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<sup>52</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p.29, 281.

interpretation on the observation of human essence. Man for him is a dual nature consisting of rationality and passions. The beginning of Machiavellian thought lies at the core of natural right, in the study of human nature, in a stable background on which every impending conclusion depends. The difference with the classics lies in the overwhelming domination of passions over rationalism, human nature is not characterized by rationality and a proper natural order, but by the chaotic dominance of passions. Machiavelli considers the dominance of rationality over passions to be an exception, which can happen to a few humans. In the vast majority of humans, passions play a major role in their natural substance. Human nature must be defined on the basis of the majority of cases, on the basis of the canon and not on the basis of exceptions. We need to investigate human natural right, as it is in most cases and not as we would like it to be or as it is rarely. Machiavellian natural right is dominated by a completely pessimistic anthropology, humans are by nature evil, defective, have no prospect of individual or collective improvement or completion-perfection. The only hope in the awkwardness of the human condition is the coercion offered by the political institutions, the powerful political state as a creation of human will and determination becomes the creator of man<sup>53</sup>.

### ***The historicism***

But the forced formation of man by the institutions of the state<sup>54</sup> is governed by the subjectivity of the sovereign. Positive law is not based on the objectivity of the human substance, but on the will of the holder of power. The goal of the Machiavellian model of domination is the control of man by the human nature and not the completion-perfection of a

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<sup>53</sup> Strauss L., “*The Three Waves of Modernity*”, Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 88.

<sup>54</sup> Strauss L., “What is political philosophy?”, Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 42.

natural end. For Machiavelli, human nature is synonymous with chaos, chance and imperfection and leads to destruction. The connection of human nature to human goal has been shown to be detrimental to the human condition. For there to be decisive results of human control, we must make man the master of human nature and give him the reins to plan his history<sup>55</sup>. But the autonomy of the human goal from the human essence opens the horizon of subjectivity and relativism, as political control is based on the selfishness of political domination. The attempt to degrade human goal by rejecting any natural correctness cannot stop the onslaught of subjectivity and relativity and the inevitable ejection into historicism. Only power justifies the correctness of control over man, no criterion of human value exists on the horizon of political thought. Machiavelli declares his neutrality in defining human goal, this is not the work of political science, but of the selfishness of the sovereign, who can plan the salvation of the people under his control or their destruction. Machiavelli's enlightenment or propaganda makes, according to Strauss, man the absolute master of political and historical reality, but it also makes him completely homeless<sup>56</sup>, as with the absolute freedom it gives, leaves man alone in his inhospitable world of absolute relativism and nihilism. Man, moving away from the safety of the human essence, now enters into conditions of inaccessible historicism, where the cruelty of power signifies any political reality. Man struggles to find himself, in a reality where only decisive power can define anything. The Enlightenment that begins with Machiavelli is a dark grove

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<sup>55</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> Strauss L., *Natural Right and History*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953, pp. 4-5. Cf. Vavouras El., "Machiavelli: Natural right and historicism", *POLIS*, Volum IX, Nr. 3 (33), 2021, pp. 5-24 (<http://revistapolis.ro/.../revista/2021/Polis%20nr%2033.pdf>). Cf. McBrayer G. "On 'The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right' in *Natural Right and History*", Burns T. (Ed.), *Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought*, Brill, The Netherlands, 2015, pp. 33-49.

from which no light is produced, but the gloomy darkness of historicism<sup>57</sup>.

*Political philosophy or political methodology?*

The question now remains to be answered whether Machiavelli is proposing a new political philosophy or something else. Science or philosophy can be defined as the activity that can rationally state the nature of its cognitive subject and its purpose, which emerges from it. Political philosophy or science has as its cognitive subject the research of human nature and as its goal is the human bliss, which is based on the perfection of its material, i.e., of human essence. Political philosophy or science in the exact sense of the word is the thorough knowledge of the essence and purpose of man as an individual or social being. The Machiavellian proposition rejecting the substance-purpose relationship also rejects the notion of political science and consolidates the notion of political methodology. Political methodology makes a sociological type of observation of human behavior expressing its neutrality for human improvement or perfection. Political methodology is indifferent to the criteria of value of human action and is a tool, an instrument for achieving any political goal. Machiavellian methodology offers means or modes of controlling man serving any subjective goal. The successful evaluation of the methodology depends on maximizing the control over the human being through the dominant means that it suggests. Machiavelli offers new modes and institutions of domination, he not interested in human perfection or bliss. His teaching is an instrument of domination in the hands of the decisive man, who shapes human and historical matter according to his will. The Machiavellian proposition is analogous to the concept of dexterity in its Aristotelian version. Dexterity is the knowledge of the means necessary to achieve

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<sup>57</sup> Strauss L., "What is political philosophy?", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 47.

whatever goal the human subject sets<sup>58</sup>. On the contrary, political science or philosophy is the knowledge of the means to attain virtuous ends. The dexterity of Machiavellian methodology flows into the quicksand of historicism, which justifies only the determination to impose, to prevail by any means.

So, Strauss completely separates political philosophy from the history of philosophy, and any other superficially modern "science" sees under the influence of historicism the human condition as a consequence of historical processes. Political philosophy investigates the human essence, human natural right, and on the basis of this interpretation plans the human future, the prospect of achieving political bliss. There is a chaotic gap here with the modern conception of the notion of "science", where the scientific interpretation consists of a description of the human condition in the middle or as a consequence of historical phenomena, without aiming at a blissful state based on the solid background of human nature. The modern conception of political philosophy investigates the past, i.e., what historical realization contributed to the creation of a political theory, describes philosophical events and their causes, expressing its neutrality in questions of human value. This new delimitation of political science emerges from the Machiavellian perspective on man, which is based on the observation of human activity and proceeds to build a methodology of human control at a specific historical moment. This methodology cannot answer what is good or bad for man, but only decides that we can control man. The essence of political science or philosophy for Strauss is not radically historical in its modern forgery, but radically human, as it emerges from the reading of human natural right and aims at the proper shaping of the human future to achieve individual and political bliss<sup>59</sup>. It can decide with the certainty that derives from the knowledge of its scientific subject, of human

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<sup>58</sup> Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1144a.

<sup>59</sup> Strauss L., "Political Philosophy and History", *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p.56. Strauss L., *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1965, p.38.

nature, what is good or bad for man, what is right and what is wrong, just as Socrates and the other ancient Greek philosophers declared during the project of determination of human value or of the best social order, which is close to bliss. According to this argument, political philosophy is necessary for man, because without it there can be no prospect of happiness or completion. It is, as Plato would say, the most significant science, or, as Aristotle would note, the greatest art with an architectural function, imperative and self-imperative, i.e., the only one that can decide for itself and give orders to the other arts, because she knows the human essence and purpose.

### **Conclusions and critique**

It could be said that Machiavelli's interpretation of Machiavelli is neither ordinary nor simple. Strauss makes a critical reading of Machiavellian work on multiple levels of both form and content, so it is a thorough and substantive analysis. Also, the Straussian interpretation does not focus only in a central work, such as *The Prince*, but has a full view of Machiavellian thought. At the same time, Strauss tries to avoid the interpretive impasse of historicism, where every philosophical thought, and in this case Machiavellian thought, is a creation of the era to which it belongs and is governed by a sterile discontinuity. For Strauss, Machiavelli is more influential in our time than he was in his own time. Machiavellian thought is not limited as a derivative of history, but creates history itself. Machiavellian enlightenment or propaganda as the beginning of the first wave of modernity is the core of the development of any modern thought, especially at the political level. Machiavelli in his days failed to introduce any theoretical innovation in relation to the ancients, there is almost nothing in his work that does not have classical political thought as its beginning. Moreover, in the *Discourses*, in his bigger work, he struggles to restore something old and forgotten, the mixed constitution of the Roman Republic, therefore he is a nostalgic of the classic, he tries to get back to

where he started<sup>60</sup>. Moreover, if we place him in the opposite of the great classical philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato or Aristotle, he comes second or inferior to their opponents, such as the Sophists, Thucydides or Isocrates, from whom he may have gained significant or mimetic endings. On a practical, historical level, he succeeds in creating the theoretical background for the unification of Italy into a powerful nation-state<sup>61</sup>, such as Isocrates - or something less than that - through the literary form of *Protreptics* or in other words *Mirrors of Princes*. What Machiavelli achieved in relation to his classical predecessors was to give to the political methodology of the use of any means to achieve any goal public form. Machiavelli became an advocate of this method in order to gain public political validity. All the previous ones were possessed by a moral hesitation to cognitively validate what was happening around them from the beginning of the human condition in the political activity and they themselves strengthened it with their teaching. The political methodology of applying selfishness was dynamically present, but only Machiavellian thought dared to support it theoretically without moral inhibitions<sup>62</sup>.

What, then, is what makes Machiavelli such a decisive thinker, worthy of the Straussian interpretation? For Strauss, Machiavellian theoretical achievement is that he succeeds in misleading us, in leading us through his intelligent propaganda away from philosophy or political science in the literal sense of the word. Machiavellian deception changes the whole political horizon, creates through relativism that envelops a

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<sup>60</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 296-297.

<sup>61</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 171. Cf. Vavouras El., "Isocrates: a Machiavellian of the 4th BC. century. "Aspects of Isocratic Political Philosophy", *Greek Philosophical Review*, 28 (2011), 115-134.

<sup>62</sup> Strauss L., "Niccolò Machiavelli", Strauss L., - Cropsey J. (Ed.), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 296-297. Namazi R., "Leo Strauss on Machiavelli's the *Prince* and the *Discourses*: A Recently Discovered Lecture", *Interpretation*, Volume 43 / Issue 3, 2017, p. 433.

foggy scene, where human values are annihilated by the neutrality or the indifference to the political purpose. Man is considered part of a hostile nature that must be controlled in every way<sup>63</sup>. The Machiavellian methodology of domination over nature or chance, over human imperfection is very difficult to deal with. The certainty that exudes through the degradation of human goal and the annihilation of chance convincingly convinces of its functionality or authenticity. However, despite its convincing spread, the impasses that this methodology leads to are more than obvious in the current human condition. Machiavelli is the creator of modernity and therefore responsible for its impasses. The charm of Machiavellian teaching has led modern man away from any certainty, far from the sure home of his natural existence, to the most relentless historicism. Moving away from human nature, man tries in every way to control this ruthless enemy, but at the same time he irrevocably loses his destination, because the essence and purpose of man may be contained in human nature, in human natural right. Unable to solve the political problem, Machiavelli violently severed the ties between man and his substance, throwing him into the abyss of historicism and modernity, to the most decisive or effective, but at the same time to the most inhuman we have imagined. . From this point of view, Machiavellian influence may be the time to overcome with a return to classical political science<sup>64</sup>.

Thus, most of Strauss's Machiavelli commentators do not avoid falling in the vicious circle of misinterpretation, as they focus their criticism on whether Strauss's positions on Machiavellian thought are interpretively correct, while neglecting Machiavelli's methodological function in the development of Strauss's philosophy. This interpretive negligence stems from the misunderstanding of classical natural right that they have, in contrast to Strauss, who has a thorough knowledge of all aspects of ancient thought in a way

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<sup>63</sup> Strauss L., "The Three Waves of Modernity", Strauss L., *An introduction to political philosophy: ten essays*, edited with an introduction by H. Gildin, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1989, p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> Strauss L., *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 174, 298.

that integrates it constructively and integrates it into his own renaissance plan of the western philosophy. If one doesn't have a deep knowledge of classical natural right, he cannot fully grasp the direction of Strauss's analysis. Strauss, then, is wrongly treated only as a commentator on Machiavelli, when in fact he uses Machiavelli as an interpretive stage and instrument for the development of the philosophical theory of natural right. For Strauss, Machiavelli is the path of constant communication between classical and modern natural right, between classical political thought and modernity. Machiavelli is Strauss's "mouthpiece"<sup>65</sup> for articulating his own positions. The shocking depiction of Machiavellian positions performs that attractive function for the esoteric influence of the Straussian positions. Strauss uses Machiavellian propaganda or blasphemy to attract and consolidate his own line of thought. He chooses the role of Machiavelli's commentator, in order to gain "interpretive immunity" and to be able to freely promote his own philosophical designs. Strauss's unbounded appreciation of Machiavelli stems precisely from the Machiavellian function of propaganda. As the coincidence of philosophy and political power belongs to the realm of chance, if this is pursued in a scientific-philosophical way, the Machiavellian interpretation is used by Strauss as an instrument of creating a true propaganda or ideology with philosophical parameters<sup>66</sup>. If philosophy is incompatible with political governance - and especially with democracy, as the case of Socrates has shown us - Strauss teaches us that we need a Machiavellian mode, a propagandistic or persuasive way of promoting virtuous ends. The common good can only be achieved in a Machiavellian way.

The defectiveness or the imperfection of the majority of human material inevitably leads to the pursuit of virtuous ends by immoral means. The ideal state of rationalism proposed by

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<sup>65</sup> Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 576.

<sup>66</sup> Drury S. B., "The hidden meaning of Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*", *History of Political Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1985), p. 578.

the ancient Greek philosophers can never become a reality in terms of truth and science, with a complete alignment of human essence and human purpose, but can only be realized as a "reflection" of the excellent constitution. We cannot achieve the best constitution or the complete human bliss, but we must act under its "reflection" for the benefit of man. Machiavelli shows us the way to achieve this goal with the omnipotence of state institutions, which must be structured as a reflection of truth, as a parallel path, as an ideology of truth. As it is impossible for people to fully align themselves with the truth of their essence, they must be compelled by the "reflection" of their essence and purpose, which is promoted by the formative function of state institutions. Positive law must be a "reflection" of natural right, just as material beings are a mimetic "reflection" of eternal ideas in Platonic philosophical design. Otherwise, man will remain homeless in the vortex of historicism and relativism, in the destructive waves of modernity.

