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Machiavelli and the liberalism of fear

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Abstract
This article revisits the long-standing question of the relations between ethics and politics in Machiavelli's work, assessing its relevance to the 'liberalism of fear' in particular in the work of Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and also John Dunn. The article considers ways in which Machiavelli has been a 'negative' resource for liberalism – for instance, as a presumed proponent of tyranny; but also ways in which even for the liberalism of fear he might be considered a 'positive' resource, above all around the issues of political necessity and prudential judgement.

Keywords
ethics, history of ideas, liberalism of fear, Niccolò Machiavelli, political theory

There is an obvious irrepressibility about Machiavelli. To paraphrase Montesquieu, who was by no means unequivocally hostile to Machiavelli: we will always need to be cured of him (Montesquieu, 1989: 389). Whether as negative foil or inspiration, Machiavelli is an iterative presence in political thought; and this is not just a matter of 'history' but of each conjuncture, since every generation focuses on a different Machiavelli, and in various kinds of reaction to him. Iteration can take different forms; sometimes Machiavelli has been a 'scandal' to which political thought must supply an answer; sometimes he has been a resource, even for traditions that would otherwise appear to run counter to him.

The liberal tradition – or rather traditions, since there is no one liberal tradition – would be a case in point. It is not that Machiavelli in any way 'anticipates'

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liberalism, or even is a 'precursor' to it in any direct sense (cf. Manent, 1996; Laski, 1962: 12). But Machiavelli has been a constant provocation and also, at varying times and at varying intensities, a resource for liberalism. In the postwar period, this sense of being a resource came largely through the Machiavelli of the *Discorsi* rather than the seemingly diabolically inclined author of *Il Principe*, a fairly long-standing theme which culminated – albeit in a form that is certainly more republican than liberal – in the work of Quentin Skinner (Skinner, 1998a; Skinner, 1998b: 46–7, 63–4). Here, anyway, Machiavelli emerges as a pre-liberal thinker of the liberties, concerned with issues to do with the promotion, protection and indeed the governance of liberty. The 'diabolic' Machiavelli specifically of *Il Principe* has had a different history of course, although here too there have been attempts to redeem his insights for something like liberalism; for instance, in the writings of Isaiah Berlin, considered briefly below, but also – albeit in a very different way – within the tradition of the history of ideas itself, where *Il Principe* has come to be regarded not as a wholly disjunct version of Machiavelli from that of the *Discorsi* but as one tied to it in complex ways as well as to other writings in the genre of princely political tactics (Skinner, 1998a).

The purpose of this article is to pursue a related but different line. It investigates the extent to which Machiavelli might be a resource – on the face of it, certainly an unlikely one – for a specific kind of liberalism, the *liberalism of fear* (Shklar, 1998; Williams, 2005). Just as for other kinds of liberalism, for the liberalism of fear Machiavelli's influence has been at most negative: as a *contrast* to what the liberalism of fear itself might look like, illuminating some of its emphases but not directly advocating them. But, as we shall contend, Machiavelli can also be a positive resource for such a liberalism, on the one hand in providing a nuanced account of a kind of calculus of fear and cruelty in political life, and on the other in laying down some of the rudiments of a prudentialist take on politics. Finally, in the conclusion, we offer some brief remarks about the consequences of all this for how we might think about issues of political identity in the history of ideas.

Pluralism

That even and especially the 'diabolical' Machiavelli of *Il Principe* might be a negative resource for liberalism was argued with greatest aplomb by Isaiah Berlin (Berlin, 1979; cf. Ball 1995: 65–82). A brief look at Berlin will show something of how Machiavelli can be taken as a negative resource. This viewpoint takes it that Machiavelli, himself no liberal, nonetheless contributed to the possibility of liberalism, or at least to one version of liberalism as a general perspective of toleration and pluralism. In 1953 Berlin delivered his tour de force of a paper on the originality of Machiavelli; the full text was not published until 1972 (Berlin, 1979). Berlin contended that the true originality of Machiavelli lay in the implicit assumption of the incommensurability of values that was the implication of his works. This, Berlin claimed, was what accounted for the 'scandal' produced by Machiavelli's writings. Berlin, in effect, saved Machiavelli for liberalism – at least on a broad conception of liberal pluralism. For if values are incommensurable then the way is left open, if only on pragmatic rather than ideological grounds, for

'empiricism, pluralism, toleration, compromise' (ibid.: 78). Thus, for Berlin, Machiavelli's work forms part of the basis of 'the very liberalism that Machiavelli would surely have condemned' (ibid.: 79).

Berlin's point was that what was at stake in Machiavelli was not an opposition between morality and something else (immorality of some sort), but one that operated – in the plural – between rival moralities. What was at issue was not the opposition between a cold political calculability and the moral consciousness of Christianity but between two alternative moralities, albeit one in effect pagan, the other Christian:

> This is not a division of politics from ethics. It is the uncovering of the possibility of more than one system of values, with no criterion common to the systems whereby a rational choice can be made between them. This is not the rejection of Christianity for paganism (although Machiavelli clearly preferred the latter), nor of paganism for Christianity (which, at least in its historical form, he thought incompatible with the basic needs of normal men), but the setting of them side by side, with the implicit invitation to men to choose either a good, virtuous, private life, or a good, successful, social existence, but not both. (Berlin, 1979: 71)

Such, for Berlin, was the source of Machiavelli's 'originality', and the true source of his scandal. The point, perhaps, was not so much whether this was the correct Machiavelli on the basis of a reading of the texts; rather the point was about reception – implications for value pluralism was the effect Machiavelli had whether he willed it or not. On the other hand, different consequences surely apply if this is indeed the 'wrong' Machiavelli (since, after all, other interpretations might yield different implications, if any, for liberalism), and it is not difficult to contend that it is indeed the wrong one.

Berlin's view was that Machiavelli's originality lies in exhibiting the existence of distinct value spheres. Yet perhaps this makes of Machiavelli rather too much of a precursor of dramatic Weberian invocations of the warring gods, even though Berlin's own value pluralism rather lacked the tragic implications of that. In any case, a more orthodox yet arguably more accurate reading would surely hold that Machiavelli recognizes one moral value sphere, broadly speaking – in spite of his unquestioned anti-clericalism, which is a different thing – the Christian one, but recognizes that political conduct requires occasional deviations from it in being, if only on occasion, *non bono*. Indeed, it could be said that Machiavelli inhabits a single moral universe precisely insofar as he contends that political realism compels one at times to depart from it. For him, politics is not another morality in itself, even though it sometimes entails tactical departures from ordinary morality. This, too, means that we are further away from the kinds of hard-edged political realism espoused by later writers such as Max Weber than is usually thought. For Weber, politics was essentially, if ultimately, linked to violence (Weber, 1991: 126); for Machiavelli the link though permanent was, at it were, more latent, more contingent, less 'necessary'. But that, as we shall see, is not least because Machiavelli held to no coherent and general science or vocation of politics in any case.

The satirical effect

Nonetheless, even if we cannot invoke a political 'value-sphere' as such in Machiavelli's works, this does – if only on account of the latent possibility of violence – make the demands of political life different from other, more mundane demands. And if we grant this much, does this view have consequences for how we see Machiavelli's resonances with liberalism? One way is to regard Machiavelli as sending us warnings about the temptations of power, and this, we shall see, is a theme that is integral to a different kind of liberalism from Berlin's, the liberalism of fear.

This is what we might call the satirical model. And again it represents a negative resource for liberalism rather than a positive one. Some strands of the Enlightenment were precursors to this. As Rousseau famously wrote of Machiavelli in *The Social Contract*: 'Whilst pretending to teach lessons to kings, he taught great lessons to people' (Rousseau, 1997: 95). Thus Machiavelli's *Il Principe* was, in effect, an educational satire – intended or not – on political power; even a clandestinely republican tract (Machiavelli, 1998: xxii). Spinoza in the *Political Treatise* had observed that Machiavelli, 'ever shrewd', was showing in *Il Principe* that a 'free multitude should beware of entrusting its well-being entirely to one person' (Spinoza, 2016: 531). This, again, is Machiavelli not as outright enemy but as 'educator'. Or consider Diderot and his article on 'Machiavellianism' in the *Encyclopédie* (Diderot, 1876: XVI, 32–3; cf. Gay, 1996: 286–7; Meinecke, 1957[1924]: ch. 12). Here Diderot separates the man and his work. Machiavelli, says Diderot, was a courageous man who endured torture with fortitude. But his work in *Il Principe* invokes tyranny as an ideal. One would think that this would hardly be likely to endear Machiavelli to the Enlightenment. And yet, Diderot argues, *Il Principe* is in fact a warning directed at a free citizenry. It is, then, a satire on power. It is as if, argues Diderot, Machiavelli is telling the citizens that this is what will befall them if they submit themselves to the mastery of a prince; '*voilà la bête féroce à laquelle vous vous abandonnerez*' (Diderot, 1876: 33). In other words, a text such as *Il Principe* is structured – whether Machiavelli intended this or not – to function as a kind of self-defeating prophecy. Machiavelli shows what political subjects should fear and not simply what princes should do.

Now, this is precisely what we mean by Machiavelli as negative resource. Machiavelli has not ceased to play this role. Indeed for a contemporary variant of the Machiavelli-as-satire argument that is more overtly directed to liberalism, and – as we shall see – specifically to the liberalism of fear, we can turn to the work of Bernard Williams (Williams, 2005; Osborne, 2008; and see Sagar, 2016 for a very high-quality account). Here, too, Machiavelli represents a kind of satire on the capabilities of power. For Williams, the issue raised by Machiavelli is to do with the ordinary – but serious – temptations of politics; as he puts it, not the issue of politicians as criminals but that of politicians as crooks (Williams 1981a: 55; Osborne, 2014). From crook to criminal is not, however, necessarily such a large jump; here we have ultimately the famous problem of political 'necessity', of dirty hands, and, by derivation, the typically liberal 'distrust' of politics – the whole hermeneutics of suspicion with which liberalism surrounds politics (see Hardin, 2002). The idea here is that those who obey the logic of political reason are not necessarily bad people in an absolute moral sense; it is rather

political necessity, however one is to decide on that, which compels them to act in certain ways. Thus certain kinds of liberalism extend their tolerance even to the perpetrators of wicked things. In this spirit, Williams, for instance, invokes what he specifically calls 'Machiavelli's thesis' that

> . . . the responsibilities of government are sufficiently different from those of private individuals to make governmental virtue a rather different matter from individuals – or rather (and this is very much the point) from that of individuals who are being protected by a government. (Williams, 2005: 157)

In other words Machiavelli has exhibited, in a way that is useful to a liberalism that is not utopian or meliorist so much as generically suspicious of power, the potentially, and inevitably, diabolical nature of politics; that politics is inherently dangerous in the sense that it – sometimes necessarily – invites virtues that are strictly speaking contrary to the rules if not of *virtù* per se then of what is normally understood by moral virtue. This, at least in a putatively liberal age, makes political power generically dangerous. Williams refers to this 'Machiavelli thesis' also as the 'anti-tyranny argument', to the effect that 'precisely because of their peculiar powers and opportunities, governments are disposed to commit illegitimate actions which they will wish to conceal' (Williams, 2002: 207). Machiavelli, Williams observes, takes power – not justice, right, or the good – to be the basic material or element of politics. In this it is a sort of mirror-image of any variant of liberalism that is suspicious of political power per se:

> Like *The Prince*, it [liberalism] takes seriously power and the surrounding distributions and limitations on power in any given situation. It is a close relation of Machiavelli (in that incarnation, not in his virtuous republic persona); very roughly, it has the same sense of what is important and is on the other side. (Williams, 2005: 59; cf. Williams, 2002: 208)

It is on the other side, indeed, because Williams envisages Machiavelli's listeners – the addressees of *Il Principe* – as being different from his originally designated readers, princes and those in power. For Williams, *Il Principe* has in the context of modern liberalism a universal audience: it addresses all of us since we are all governed, all subject to power and its potential abuse. If the first task of any politics is to solve the Hobbesian problems of disorder, cruelty and fear, liberalism, or at least the liberalism of fear, recognizes – as Hobbes did not – that the solution can always become part of the problem; for instance, in the form of an overbearing state or concentrated forms of economic power (Williams, 2005: 59). Such a perspective, with its reminders from Machiavelli, is illustrative of the truth that representative, liberal democracy is not plebiscitary democracy, that rulers are not merely functionaries of the governed; hence that, all the more, the governed need to be suspicious of those who rule, including and perhaps especially those who rule in their own name. Hence the need in our democracies not for a blind trust in the political class, but a systemic political distrust; and a distrust that is, precisely, political and not moral – not concerned so much with the moral peccadilloes of politicians but with the normal, if frightening, temptations of politics.

Williams himself invoked the concept of the liberalism of fear in his work, seeing a suspicion of the cruelties that can be consequent upon the use of political power as being integral to that (Williams, 2005). The term itself, however, was coined by Judith Shklar (Shklar, 1998; cf. Forrester, 2011 and 2012 for some of the history; and, more negatively, Muller, 2008). Shklar's article on the liberalism of fear dates from the late 1980s, but aspects of her conception of it long pre-date that. The term itself was used in *Ordinary Vices* (1984) but the idea was also surely present in earlier works such as *Legalism* (1964: 5–6) where it appears under the rubric of a 'barebones liberalism', a politics of 'permanent minorities', and even – albeit, as it were, in embryo – in her first book *After Utopia* with its call for a 'reasoned scepticism' in politics (1957: 272–3). The point behind the idea was not to displace other forms of liberalism or indeed other kinds of politics, but to emphasize a bedrock importance of liberalism, in the prevention of cruelty (Shklar, 1984: 5–20). Fundamental to liberalism, Shklar argued, is not justice or even liberty in a positive sense but the prevention of the excess or abuse of power. All governments – and not just all governments – are capable of cruelty; and the liberalism of fear prioritizes that suspicion above all others. The liberalism of fear is the permanent suspicion of power.

Now one might think that Machiavelli might be, as he clearly was for Williams, at least a negative resource for Shklar. In fact he was more like simply anathema, and it is this position that we shall want to contest in what follows. For her, if one fears fear itself above all, then Machiavelli can only be a monster, someone who – in Shklar's view – actually advocates a politics of cruelty and is certainly an apologist for it (see Shklar, 1984: 205–7). For Shklar, then, Machiavelli is not after all 'another Hobbes' – a thinker of some obvious use for liberalism – but a straightforward enemy (ibid.: 207). In the liberalism of fear, the primary and non-negotiable enemy is cruelty; for from cruelty comes fear, and from fear comes loss of freedom (ibid.: 7–44). Machiavelli, for Shklar, turned cruelty into policy. In this, Shklar contrasted Machiavelli with her own proto-liberal hero, Montaigne:

> In *The Prince*, Machiavelli had asked whether it was more efficient for a self-made ruler to govern cruelly or leniently, and had decided that, on the whole, cruelty worked best. Montaigne raised the question that the prince's victims might ask: Was it better to plead for pity or display defiance in the face of cruelty? There are no certain answers, he concluded. Victims have no certainties. They must cope, without guide books to help them. The second of the Essays deals with the sadness of those whose children and friends die. And the third suggests that one might take precautions against the terrors of princes. If there were an established review of the deeds of princes as soon as they died, their passion for posthumous fame might restrain them here and now. Even Machiavelli had noted that an indiscriminate butcher was not likely to enjoy the best of reputations in history, even if he should have succeeded in all his enterprises. Montaigne was only too aware of how cruel the passion for fame made ambitious princes, and he did not really place much hope in any restraining devices. But by reading *The Prince*, as one of its victims might, Montaigne set a great distance between his own and Machiavelli's classicism. (1984: 10–11; cf. Viroli, 1998: 176, n. 10)

One can argue about this, and indeed attempt to redeem Machiavelli both against Shklar yet *for* the liberalism of fear. There are good grounds for this even from

within the history of ideas. Montaigne himself was hardly an outright anti-Machiavel, as is obvious on a reading of, among others, the first essay of the third book of the *Essais* on the 'useful and the honourable'. Here Montaigne acknowledges the periodic necessity of, in effect, the *non bono*. Politics here is largely a matter not of outright and unwavering principles but of prudence. A prince sometimes has to do the bad thing: 'But if he did it without regret, if it did not grieve him to do it, it is a sign that his conscience is in a bad way' (Montaigne, 2003: 736; cf. making a parallel point, Williams, 1981a: 62). As for honesty and instrumentalism, Montaigne acknowledges that real politics entails elements of each; and yet where he does seem to counter Machiavelli more or less directly it is in the idea that one can have a coherent strategy at all. The early contributions to the first book of the *Essais* figure Montaigne attempting to show that the same strategy can lead to different results, and that different strategies can lead to the same result. Shklar observes that these reflections are 'aimed at Machiavelli' (Shklar, 1984: 10). And yet Montaigne's emphasis is not so contrary to Machiavelli's own views. In the *Discorsi* different things bring about different results and it is, indeed, impossible to decide on an invariably best form of action. For instance, Hannibal's (cruel) strategy in Italy was wholly different from Scipio's (lenient) strategy in Spain, and yet it brought the same results (Machiavelli, 1996: 262–3). What is required on Machiavellian terms is of course *virtù* (ibid.: 263); which might be translated not just in terms of ability or courage but more generally in terms – at least terms that will be relevant to the liberalism of fear – as something like prudential strength (cf. Machiavelli, 1988: 103–4). The political actor who has virtue in this sense is one who is experienced in judging when and how to act, based on the given materials and an instinct for the given moment. Prudential virtue also implies creativity and an unwillingness to give up; after all, even if fortune is ineffable, precisely because it is ineffable there is always scope for new possibilities; hope is always possible in a world without the apparent securities of providence (Machiavelli, 1996: 199). What Machiavelli provided, then, was not a fixed doctrine or calculus of political action but reminders, examples taken from history, designed to illuminate how one might act in particular situations – and situations in Machiavelli, just as for the liberalism of fear, are always particular. In other words, Machiavelli himself was an advocate not of fixed protocols but of prudence when it comes to political life.

Machiavelli and cruelty

To illustrate this prudential theme, let us take the specific question of cruelty in Machiavelli. The reason for this is obvious; it is that cruelty, or rather fundamental resistance to it, is the central concept of Shklar's conception of the liberalism of fear and yet in denying any relevance to Machiavelli she denies herself this time a positive resource that might have been used. For instead of simply a reductive celebration of cruelty, Machiavelli delivers a kind of nuanced calculus of it. This calculus is not, obviously, a 'liberal' one as such, but it does show the complexities that any account of cruelty from the perspective of the liberalism of fear would have to confront.

If it is certainly the case that politics is not a separable moral sphere for Machiavelli, then it is indeed a domain in which one has to know when and how to act; one has to develop judgement in choosing when and what is necessary. Sometimes, for Machiavelli, cruelty or at least the *non bono* is indeed necessary. But Machiavelli's message on this score, contra Shklar's emphases, is, in effect, *be good if you can*, albeit if only for reasons of (political) expediency. In general anyway a prince should 'not deviate from right conduct if possible, but be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary' (Machiavelli, 1988: 62). You have to be *non bono* at times because other people certainly will: 'If a ruler who wants always to act honourably is surrounded by many unscrupulous men his downfall is inevitable' (ibid.: 54). But generally it is better to be *bono*.

In fact it appears that whether we regard cruelty in terms of Berlin's categories of either the pagan-political or from a Christian point of view, cruelty for Machiavelli is certainly to be regretted. Some have gone further and even claimed that cruelty is regarded as one of the cardinal vices by Machiavelli (de Grazia, 1994: 83 ff.) This is possibly overstating the matter, or at least making the issue more one-dimensional than it=is. But a case can be made for it nonetheless. Above all in that very singular text, the *Istorie Fiorentini*, Machiavelli declared that cruelty is straightforwardly and self-evidently a bad thing both in itself and in relation to the ends of government (e.g. Machiavelli, 1998: 98–9). Or in certain places, such as at chapter 10 of book 1 of the *Discorsi*, cruelty is criticized more or less unreservedly and goodness and beneficence are highly praised (Machiavelli, 1996: 31–3; 1998: 95 and 161). History condemns the tyrant not just because tyranny does not confer glory and honour, but because tyranny, at least as a general means of government, does not tend to work, its residue being only 'infamy, reproach, blame, danger, and disquiet' (Machiavelli, 1996: 31). And when cruelty or the *non bono* more generally are condoned what is at stake is not an advocacy of political cruelty or *non bono* as an ethos as such but at most periodic cruelty, periodic *non bono behaviour* – and even then often only the *show* of cruelty; or at least the show of a willingness to stand up to one's enemies – reduced to the scale of a temporarily applied and hence limited political technique. But at no point does Machiavelli counsel evil, the *non bono*, or cruelty as integral to any *general* strategy of politics.

Machiavelli's insistence on the limited merits of cruelty – that cruelty is never good but sometimes necessary – is not least a polemical, indeed somewhat sardonic, riposte to Seneca's advice to Nero against cruelty in his *De Clementia* and the Cicero of *De Officiis*. This does not mean, however, that the theme is there simply for rhetorical, contrarian effect. Rather, the theme of cruelty is one through which Machiavelli develops his sense, more widely, of prudence in politics. Too much cruelty does harm. In this cruelty is akin to fear; used prudently cruelty can prevent further need for it, but used endemically, aside from being definitely *non bono*, it tends to fail (Machiavelli, 1988: 33). Just as with fear in general, situations where imprudent cruelty has led to more cruelty can result in an inescapable spiral. Even in *Il Principe*, where cruelty is unsurprisingly given more sanction than in the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli holds that those who are persistently cruel tend to defeat the object of holding on to their principalities; rather, if bad things must be done, it is important to do them at the beginning and more or less all at once and then have them over with (ibid.: 33; Machiavelli, 1976: 41). It is, to put it

crudely, a sort of 'least-worst' prudentialism of cruelty and the *non bono*; as little as possible, but then for the wider good.

Again, this is as much a matter of prudence as it is of conviction. Rulers must avoid being despised by the people, not least for their own safety; to avoid conspiracies against them. Fear is one thing, outright hatred another; and of course there is a wide terminology of fear in Machiavelli – often, for example, fear or *temere*, *avere paura* and cognates are better translated as something like 'respect' (see Machiavelli, 1998: xxxiii). One needs, certainly, to generate respect. Perhaps doing so entails robust behaviour at times; but in fact, trickery appears to be a better strategy than outright *non bono* behaviour. The prince must be a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten the wolves, but being a fox is probably more important (Machiavelli, 1988: 61). Again, however, this is a matter of tactics and a knowledge of the specific situation; hold to the good when you can, do the bad thing only if you have to and if you do the bad thing avoid cheapening the currency of power by doing it too often. Indeed, as Mauricio Viroli has pointed out, Machiavelli in fact never posits a 'theory' of political conduct at all. Steeped in the classical rhetorical tradition, more often than not he gives different views and takes them to *extremis*; providing maxims but not a systemic or general approach as such. As Viroli is right to stress, there is nothing like a 'science of politics' in Machiavelli (Viroli, 1998: 1). If we look for that we are looking for the wrong thing.

But none of this – tactics, rhetorical emphases – makes cruelty ever *bono*. Cruelty contravenes morality whether seen from either a Christian or a 'pagan' perspective, indeed from any perspective. Of Agathocles of Sparta Machiavelli writes in a famous passage that it is not virtue 'to kill one's fellow citizens, to betray one's friends, to be treacherous, murderous and irreligious; power may be gained in such ways but not glory . . . [H]is appallingly cruel and inhumane conduct, and countless wicked deeds, preclude him being numbered amongst the finest men' (Machiavelli, 1988: 31; cf. Kahn, 1986, and on glory see Owen, 2017). Cruelty is always bad; but worst of all when endemic. In the *Discorsi* Machiavelli famously instances Caligula, Nero and Vitellius for whom 'the eastern and western armies were not enough to save [them] and so many other criminal emperors from the enemies whom their wicked customs and their malevolent life had generated for them' (Machiavelli, 1996: 32). This also, importantly, bears out the difference between armies and citizens. Soldiers, Machiavelli claims, tend to cruelty, perhaps because they are used to the cruelty of military discipline; and the tyrant emperors were those most dependent on the soldiery and so most, ultimately, at their mercy. In fact military matters – in effect, discipline – are one area where cruelty is more commonly justified, but that is a special case (albeit one no doubt complicated by the preference for citizen militias over mercenaries). Only with an army is it necessary to be persistently cruel or always to hold cruelty in reserve. Otherwise, there has to be a prudent timeliness and minimalism in one's use of cruelty, if it is to be deployed at all. Cruelty says Machiavelli is to be 'well used' [*bene usate*] (Machiavelli, 1976: 41; cf. Machiavelli, 1988: 33).

At any event, most of the cruelty in *Il Principe* specifically concerns, as Leo Strauss and J. G. A. Pocock were to emphasize in such different ways, the foundations of power, the setting up of *new* principalities, Cesare Borgia being the model specifically of a new prince rather than, so to speak, a generic one (Strauss, 1958; Pocock, 1975: 158):

> And it must be understood that a ruler, and especially a new ruler, cannot always act in ways that are considered good because, in order to maintain his power, he is often forced to act treacherously, ruthlessly or inhumanely, and disregard the precepts of religion. Hence, he must be prepared to vary his conduct as the winds of fortune and changing circumstances constrain him and, as I said before, not deviate from right conduct if possible, but be capable of entering upon the path of wrongdoing when this becomes necessary. (Machiavelli, 1988: 62)

Chapter 7 of *Il Principe* as a whole is about new princes. Cruelty may be what you do at the beginning, but it is ultimately unsustainable. It is tied, specifically, to moments of political inception rather than longer-term security. It is true that in this context Machiavelli – in chapter 3 – invokes the idea that if one is to be cruel at all it is better to be wholly ruthless rather than doing things half-heartedly; 'men should either be caressed or crushed' (1988: 9). But that is precisely because cruelty is a bad thing to do; it needs to be done quickly and decisively, before moving on. This is why cruelty is best delegated, and then – if at all possible – disowned. Cesare Borgia delegated unsavoury measures to Remirro de Orco in the Romagna, but later had him chopped up in the public square, in effect 'punishing' him for his contribution (ibid.: 26). This both generated respect for Cesare Borgia and removed a problem. One can complain that this is cynical, and yet the fact that cruelty is best left to someone else indicates its problematic nature for Machiavelli and his refusal to condone it outright as a general strategy (cf. on this Walzer, 1977: 324; Williams, 1981a).

Moreover, Machiavelli holds that cruelty can prevent cruelty. Cesare Borgia had a reputation for cruelty – and not just a reputation – but actually did good things, whereas the Florentines were generous at Pistoia in 1501 (neglecting to punish the ring-leaders of violent riots) but in the long term this led to bloodshed and ruin, in other words to further misery – a short sharp shock would have been better (Machiavelli, 1988: 58; see also Machiavelli, 1958a: 115). Now, writers such as Judith Shklar herself have rejected this idea that there might be an economy of cruelty, while themselves admitting that all regimes, even the best of liberal regimes, to an extent rely on means – for instance, imprisonment – that can be described as cruel or which at least – like even the rule of law – induce fear. And yet Machiavelli's logic here seems fairly undeniable. The irony is that a little bit of harshness in the short term can lead to less in the long term, and in this sense even conventional morality is served – one is actually being *bono*. But then so much about Machiavelli is about time; knowing when to be harsh, knowing when to be lenient, knowing when to be parsimonious, knowing when to be generous. 'We must wait for Time, which is the father of truth' (Machiavelli, 1958b: 144). Cruelty and the capacity for evil are there, certainly, but even in *Il Principe* they are predominantly presented as limited, if essential, tactics and not as integral to the essence of politics per se.

Tactics not government

Where does this get us? Overall it shows – in the context of the prioritization of cruelty that is central to the liberalism of fear – the extent to which cruelty is a more nuanced concept than one might suppose, especially insofar as it is so even in the context of a

thinker such as Machiavelli who – even by someone as astute as Shklar – is widely supposed to have unequivocally advocated it. Beyond that, it helps us to see two kinds of thing.

First, in relation to Machiavelli himself, it endorses Viroli's viewpoint that there is no general 'machiavellian' sense of politics at all, whether as a 'science of politics' or even as a generalized 'art of government'. This, by the way, is quite in line with the early, pre-liberal, pre-modern reception of Machiavelli, which did not see in him a generalized politics. The scandal of Machiavelli here appears to have focused on Machiavelli's supposed irreligion rather than any positive conception of politics perceived to be generically malign – cruel, evil or otherwise. As Felix Raab demonstrated in his classic study half a century ago, Machiavelli had become a controversial figure by the 1580s, at least in England, not as the purveyor of an evil politics but as an emblem of the idea of irreligious government. Machiavelli was in fact generally *appreciated* for his political insight, that is, as a political tactician, but most writers of the period certainly could not accept the idea of 'politik religion', the idea of religion itself as a cynical, political device (Raab, 1965: 90; cf. Procacci, 1995: ch. 8). Irreligion aside, Machiavelli showed that tactics mattered; but this did not necessarily entail the endorsement of some kind of alternative political morality as such. Political tactics, it might be said, entail a knowledge of the *non bono* but this is not *non bono* per se; it is only that to govern men one must know their nature and so, at least at times, be like them. Sir Francis Bacon appears to have stated this point of view most directly:

> For it is not possible to join the wisdom of the serpent with the innocence of the dove, except men be perfectly acquainted with the nature of evil itself; for without this, virtue is open and unfenced; nay, a virtuous and honest man can do no good upon those that are wicked, to correct and reclaim them, without first exploring all the depths and recesses of their malice. (Bacon, quoted in Raab, 1965: 74)

Tactics are not the same as government. There are no *general* Machiavellian tactics that would amount to general principles of government, a science of the state or a science of politics in general. Indeed it is another irony that Machiavelli's writings should come to represent the negative foil for the development of conceptions of the art of government in the early-modern period. It was in this context that Michel Foucault argued that Machiavelli represented the end of an era not the beginning of one; that the notions of the art of government, the continuous government of 'reason of state', took Machiavelli as a foil, not as a precursor (Foucault, 2007: 65; cf. Viroli, 1992). In relation to the contested development of doctrines of police and *raison d'état* anti-Machiavellianism becomes a genre in its own right not just an ideological reaction (Foucault, 2007: 91). Machiavelli appeared, at least in *Il Principe*, to restrict himself to thinking of political power in terms of an externality to the principality involving combating exterior dangers and not entailing intrinsic questions of governing a people and territory. By contrast, in the burgeoning literature on government in the 16th century – for instance, in the writings of Guillaume de La Perrière – the problem of political power is defined as being immanent to the state:

> Machiavelli's entire analysis is aimed at defining what keeps up or reinforces the link between prince and state, whereas the problem posed by reason of state is that of the very existence and nature of the state itself. (Foucault, 2001: 316)

In this sense, Machiavelli's problematic had more to do with the micro-politics of power rather than with the general arts of government, and far more to do with a prior paradigm of political culture than the subsequent one centred on the governmentality of the state.

Prudential liberalism

This brings us to our second point, which is to do more specifically with Machiavelli's relevance for modern liberalism. Of course, the Machiavellian prince is an illiberal figure. But on the basis of the liberalism of fear, that minimalist form of liberalism that holds that cruelty is the greatest enemy of liberty, Machiavelli has an obvious resonance: just as we have seen with Williams's account of the 'Machiavelli thesis'. This is the Machiavelli as satirist of power, an enemy of liberalism certainly, but illuminating precisely for its giving grounds for suspicion of political power. But Machiavelli also has a more positive rather than precautionary role to play in relation to the liberalism of fear. This, then, is Machiavelli as a positive rather than simply a negative resource. We have in Machiavelli the priority of fear itself as perhaps *the* basic problem of politics.

No other political theorist, not even Hobbes, has made fear so central. Machiavelli is a great diagnostician of the mutuality of fear. As he says: men are driven by two things, fear and love, but fear is the more important (Machiavelli, 1988: 59). Machiavelli explores how, for example, when princes begin to be hated and have conspiracies ranged against them, their fear is quickly transformed into offences against good conduct and so onward to tyranny; and how likewise both nobles and the masses quickly come to fear such tyranny and departure from the laws. Fear breeds fear; one has to counter it with tactics, but one also has to *use* fear – to balance fears against fears. Even from a liberal point of view, at least a realist rather than a utopian one, what is important is not to avoid fear altogether – all political power, even for Shklar, rests at least in part upon fear – but to prevent it from spiralling into a kind of 'fear trap', where fear and cruelty become endemic, to prevent its being excessive, to make it the fear, as it were, of justice rather than of cruelty. But either way, and even for Machiavelli, such traps help nobody; neither the people nor the prince. Of course, Machiavelli put this political doctrine of fear to ends that were certainly not liberal, but what he encourages is a realism about fear that is more useful than the utopian idea – present even in Hobbes – that there might somehow be a *terminus ad quem* with regard to it, a means of settling the matter (and of course the Leviathan is nothing if not a utopia) once and for all. On the contrary, the politics of fear is open-ended and ongoing. If the liberalism of fear represents a liberalism without illusions or guarantees so in Machiavelli's world there are no guarantees any more than there are illusions; history is about remembering examples rather than a continuous story; disorder or potential disorder is the norm, present crises are endemic rather than prefatory to a long-deferred order (see on this Tillyard, 1944; cf. Yack, 1996). The tasks of politics are never-ending.

This prudential emphasis on the ongoing tasks of a politics without closure is, again, of some constructive utility, surely, to the liberalism of fear; a case of Machiavelli being a positive not just a negative – 'satirical' – resource. The liberalism of fear needs prudentialism. Political thought from Hobbes to Rawls has done us a disservice in this sense (Dunn, 1985). There is no 'science of politics' that can do away with fear; rather fear has to be restricted, balanced; it has to be engaged tactically, subject to constant scrutiny and criticism. One can see how prudence and the governance of fear are connected, in a manner that could in fact come straight from the 'negative' perspective of the liberalism of fear:

> No government should ever believe that it is always possible to follow safe policies. Rather, it should be realised that all courses of action involve risks: for it is in the nature of things that when one tries to avoid one danger another is always encountered. But prudence [*prudenzia*] consists in knowing how to assess the dangers, and to choose the least bad course of action as being the right one to follow. (Machiavelli, 1988: 79; Machiavelli, 1976: 85–6)

Again, it is not at all a question of simple-mindedly assimilating Machiavelli for liberalism. That anyway would be impossible. Machiavelli is certainly no liberal when it comes to prudence, least of all in *Il Principe*. Chapter 7 alone – which is a celebration of both prudence and *virtù* – is enough evidence of that. Indeed, from the perspective of the liberalism of fear prudence run amok is itself something to dread; in illiberal guise it can become the manipulative politics of the skilled and devious demagogue or can lead in the direction of those apparently Machiavellian 'malcontents' so prominent in the Tudor and early Stuart theatre (Shklar, 1984: 204). But what Machiavelli provides are reminders that, even in the vastly different context of modern liberalism, politics cannot do without prudence. The liberal tradition has more typically emphasized rules, rights and institutions, and in its more utopian forms idealized constitutional measures, rather than the kinds of *savoir-faire* necessary for political rule. But Machiavelli himself emphasized the extent to which constitutional arrangements themselves could be prudent; for instance, in balancing powers against each other so that cities or republics might thrive on the tension of dissent rather than descending into civil war (this, in sum, was the difference between the histories of Rome and Florence) (Machiavelli, 1996: 13–14; cf. Machiavelli, 1998: 6–7). Machiavelli's beloved constitutional founders – Lycurgus, Romulus – have a symbolic role in this sense; they exhibited prudence in founding constitutional arrangements that would last and yet not run into *stasis* or, as with Solon in Athens, to speedy extinction.

The emphasis on prudence also draws in the importance of character in politics. Again this is germane, in a positive way, to the liberalism of fear. Usually in liberal political theory, matters of prudential politics are reduced to procedures (transparency, duty of disclosure, conformity with the law) not as *metis* or practical intelligence. There is a utopian element to much of this liberalism; it aims to bring about the good, rather than forestall the bad. Against this, and contemporaneously with Shklar's article on the liberalism of fear, John Dunn invoked the idea of a prudential liberalism against the utopian liberalism characteristic of so much political philosophy (Dunn, 1985). Prudential liberalism is consonant with the liberalism of fear in that it emphasizes hazards to be avoided rather than positive goods to be pursued, but it adds the emphasis on judgement;

that political power involves agents who have to choose, where necessary, what it is necessary to do. Shklar's and Williams's liberalism of fear had its paragons; Montaigne, Montesquieu, Constant. The liberalism of prudence, for Dunn, has another, yet overlapping, lineage; Aristotle, Montesquieu, Tocqueville – and Machiavelli. These were writers who emphasized the prudential aspect of politics, none more so than Machiavelli. Political judgement has to encounter contingency; 'the diversity of hazards to which human collective life has always been exposed and of the profoundly disturbing . . . configuration of such hazards which it confronts at present' (ibid.: 168). Crucial here is something akin to the Machiavellian notion of the *subietto* of politics, the given material of what one confronts, which is why Dunn insists that prudential liberalism has to be 'sociologically sensitive' (ibid.: 169; Machiavelli, 1976: 27). One has to know what one is dealing with; that is part of practical, political knowledge, knowing how to accommodate oneself 'to the causal properties of existing fields of power' (Dunn, 1985: 169). And also knowing *when* to take action; for just as with Machiavelli's prince one has to know when to act as well as how to act under given circumstances; to know, as it were, how to work with fortune as well as to discern its hazards.

The prince is always thrown into novelty and an unknown future; hence Machiavelli's particular concern for the new prince, the new principality. No one has posed with such starkness the predicament of doing something new in politics, of having to act without foundations (Althusser, 1999). In liberal politics there is a gap between principle and action that is not characteristic either of forms of governance that do not rely on principles at all or those which attempt to deduce forms of action from their principles, whether on the model of a politics of conviction or on the basis of, say, utilitarianism. Hence this notion of liberal politics as a prudential enterprise has implications for how we think about political virtue. Obviously, in the context of liberalism, this will not be the Machiavellian *virtù* of tough-minded resolution. Nonetheless, not least as insulation against luck and misfortune, and because of the open-endedness of politics, political actors need character. Of course this would be entirely different from Machiavelli – after all, the liberal 'virtues' would not be instances of *virtù* – and yet Machiavelli might be a resource. Prudential liberalism would perhaps emphasize the 'ordinary virtues' of politics; 'dispositional virtues' such as willingness to compromise, tolerance and free inquiry (Dunn, 1985: 168–9). If one is prudent one weighs judgements in the balance, and is not captured either by reductive desires or over-baked principles.

Now, when it comes to the liberalism of fear and the question of character, it is usually negative dispositions that are mentioned. The liberalism of fear is, after all, itself a 'negative' liberalism, emphasizing avoidance of the bad rather than provision of the good. Fundamental to Shklar's liberalism of fear is obviously the aversion to cruelty (1984: 7–44; 37), followed at some distance by a reluctance to indulge hypocrisy, betrayal and a common liberal temptation, misanthropy. But Shklar also contends, rightly, that liberalism requires positive characteristics, above all the ability to accommodate compromise, contradiction and complexity:

> Far from being an amoral free-for-all, liberalism is, in fact extremely difficult and constraining, far too much so for those who cannot endure contradiction, complexity, diversity and the risks of freedom. (Shklar, 1984: 5)

Even these, though, are negative characteristics in a sense, entailing willingness to let go, to tolerate, combined with what Williams calls the 'habit of reluctance'; 'an essential obstacle against the happy acceptance of the intolerable' (Williams, 1981b: 63). What is salutary here is only that character does matter. In 'Politics and Moral Character', Williams argued – in a true prudential, and, one is tempted to insist, constructively post-Machiavellian spirit – that politicians need to be good most of the time and when they are not good they need to be the sort of people who know they are not doing good and who are ashamed of it: 'The point . . . is that only those who are reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary' (Williams, 1981a: 62; cf. Osborne, 2014). This is not necessarily Machiavelli's own position (though as we have seen, it was a point made by Montaigne) but the point is in a sense a Machiavellian one; that what is necessary has to be determined on the basis of experience, character and prudence. Necessity is not just 'given', in the form of floods or earthquakes that determine what one must do from outside; rather what is to count as a necessity is also often the product of a choice, and one always with fine and debatable margins (cf. Machiavelli, 1988: 108).

All this makes prudential liberalism an, as it were, deeply undoctrinal component of an equally undoctrinal liberalism of fear. The liberalism of fear counsels an unequivocal suspicion of power as if nothing were good and bad in itself but that power makes it so. This makes it what Shklar originally called a 'barebones' liberalism, meaning not just that it was minimalist but that it was *basic* in the sense that other attitudes, aspirations and beliefs could be built on to it; a point underscored by Williams in insisting that the liberalism of fear is a kind of universalism that deals with basic fear, after which 'the liberalism of fear will move to more sophisticated conceptions of freedom, and other forms of fear, other ways in which the asymmetries of power and powerlessness work to the disadvantage of the latter' (Williams, 2005: 60). In other words, if the liberalism of fear is a barebones liberalism this does not mean that there can be no sinews, no organs, no bodily flesh that can envelop and animate it. And these at times may even look like socialism, may look like conservativism, or at least they will be the products of the prudential consideration of what can realistically be done (Dunn, 1985: 168). Prudence is what decides what is required at what particular time. This liberal sense of prudence might be seen as being Machiavellian in operation – being an endless intercourse between virtue, fortune and necessity – but deeply un-Machiavellian in spirit, above all in being unheroic (ibid.). Where Machiavelli wanted glory, the liberalism of fear counsels reminders to people as to 'what they have got and how it might go away' (Williams, 2005: 60). Paradoxically, such reminders can come from Machiavelli himself as much as from anyone else, even a Locke or a Mill.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show that Machiavelli is not just a negative resource for the liberalism of fear but also – through his analyses of political tactics, fear and cruelty and through his advocacy of something like a prudential politics – potentially a positive one. All this may be so, and yet we have repeatedly insisted that Machiavelli himself is in no way a liberal. He is not even a 'precursor' to liberalism, as someone like Berlin would

have it. And yet there is a lesson here, finally, about political identity in the history of ideas more generally. The assumption is often that particular thinkers should entirely inhabit one or other political ideology (hence the constant attempts to show that Hobbes is either a proto-liberal or an authoritarian, or that Machiavelli is either a republican or a proponent of *Realpolitik*) and that the task of political theory is to decide which. So many different schools in the history of political thought divide over such sorting attempts. But such attempts to sort particular thinkers into particular categories are almost always somewhat staged and mythical. Thinkers belong to their own time, but also to many others and so also to differing kinds of ideological allegiances. Indeed it is possible to have deep relevance for a political ideology without being possible to sort into it at all. The case of Machiavelli's is of exactly this kind; not a precursor to liberalism, certainly not himself an ideological liberal of any sort, yet somehow endlessly implicated in liberalism and its complex and variegated history.

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