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## **THE CONCEPT OF “FORTUNA” IN MACHIAVELLI’S *THE PRINCE***

The concept of “Fortuna” has attracted many historians dealing with political ideas. A major role in this respect belongs to the way in which Machiavelli analysed it and, as much, to the place occupied by this concept in *The Prince*, the famous work which consecrated the “Great Florentine” as one of the founders of the modern political sciences. This paper presents the manner in which Machiavelli defined this concept, both as a result of the contemporary vision on it and of the political and national objectives of his capital work.

The work of “the Great Florentine”, as Machiavelli was appreciated, is still considered a masterpiece within the political works of the sixteenth century Italy, and remained as such until nowadays. It still attracts the reader both for its marvelous style and its statements concerning the art of ruling a state, and particularly a Middle Age one. However, some of its assertions are still inspiring for the leaders of the day, as its statements remain vivid even today.

*The Prince* was perceived mainly as a kind of a manual for a desirable great ruler. However, Machiavelli’s work also attracted the attention by the concepts that are used in different circumstances concerning the multiple advice that he thought he was able to offer to the expected ruler of the entire Italy. Among these concepts one can recognize a “triangular” relation between “prudence,” “force” and “fraud,” “fear,” “greed” and “hate” as well as the triad “fortune,” “virtu” and “necessita”. These “triangularizations of the logical relation” between these words represent, as Anthony D’Amato stated,<sup>1</sup> another mean by which Machiavelli tried to explain the ways of action for the potential Italian ruler. Hence, the ruler must combine prudence with force for making him respected by others. Between love and hate of his subjects, he must choose a middle path, by trying not to offend them in order to inspire them if not love, at least not hate. Fear could be a good manner to achieve this status, but the ruler must not intend to surpass the limit of this, as he could be in danger of losing his throne.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony D’Amato, “The relevance of Machiavelli to Contemporary World Politics” in Anthony Parel (ed.), *The Political Calculus: essays on Machiavelli’s philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 3, article available from <http://anthonydamato.law.northwestern.edu/Adobefiles/C72cmach-rel.pdf>, Internet, accessed June 16, 2003.

An interesting relation can be perceived between “virtu” (often translated in English by “virtue” or “skill”) and “Fortuna” (with different translations as well as “virtu,” the usual one being “fortune”). An interesting analysis of these concepts is realized by Michel Aaij who believes that, besides other translations of “virtu” (i.e. “power” or “strength of character”) an important meaning of the word could be “the spirit of a nation.”<sup>2</sup> This is why “Fortuna” is a term “that carries a heavy load of tradition, deriving mainly from Boethius’s *The consolation of Philosophy*.”<sup>3</sup>

However, this long “tradition” of the concept of “fortune” begins with late Antiquity, therefore several important questions rise when one analyses this term as it is conceptualized in *The Prince*: what is Machiavelli’s point-of-view concerning the concept of “fortune” or, as it is in Italian, “Fortuna?” How did he understand it and which was its role concerning rulers’ activity?

To answer these questions is the aim of my essay and my attempt is based on Maurizio Viroli’s *Machiavelli*,<sup>4</sup> Judith N. Shklar’s *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*,<sup>5</sup> Albert O. Hirschman’s *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of “Fortuna” has a long and interesting “evolution,” beginning with Antiquity, as Romans saw it as female deity, as an effect of the Greek influence on them. The Greek concept of “tyche” had the meaning of “chance” or “luck,” having an important influence on human beings activities, an influence that is “unpredictable and uncontrollable.”<sup>7</sup> Romans believed that Fortune is a woman as it has a “fickle unreliability” that characterizes women, according to their opinion. As Hanna Pitkin points out

<sup>2</sup> Michel Aaij, “Machiavellian Rhetoric in *The Prince* and the *Mandragola*,” p. 1, available from <http://bama.ua.edu/~aaij001/machiavelli.html>, Internet, accessed June 16, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, edited by Stanley Hoffman, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). Important works concerning the concept of “Fortune” were realized by H.R. Patch (*The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1927), Vincenzo Cioffari (“The Function of Fortune in Dante, Boccaccio and Machiavelli”, *Italica* 25, 1947: 1-13), Thomas Flanagan (“The Concept of Fortuna in Machiavelli” in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli’s Political Philosophy*, edited by Anthony Parel, Toronto: University Press, 1972) but, unfortunately, their works were not available to me. However, an important informational help in this respect I have found accessing various Internet sites concerning Machiavelli’s works and point of views about this term.

<sup>7</sup> “Themes & Motifs: Fortuna: *Fortuna* in Dante,” available from [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/themes/fortune/inf\\_7.shtml](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/themes/fortune/inf_7.shtml), Internet, accessed June 17, 2003.

in her work *Fortune Is a Woman – Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli*, the Romans ‘recognized the potential conflict between virtue – that is, human strength and capability – and *Fortuna*. Virtue was aimed toward discipline, knowledge, emotional temperance, and reflection upon inner values rather than mastery of the goddess. By withdrawing from worldly matters, the individual did not strive to control fortune but to extricate himself or herself from her whims and awesome power.’<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle decided to regard fortune as “the primer mover,” as all the events that can not be explained by logical ways belongs to it.<sup>9</sup> In *Nicomachean Ethics* the Great Greek Philosopher argues that fortune is connected even with happiness, as every misfortune “may crush individual happiness.” However, in his opinion, “nobility” or “virtue” “allows the individual to escape misery in the face of misfortune because by performing virtuous acts the person attains a measure of happiness. Yet, in Aristotle’s point-of-view, virtue alone cannot provide the individual who possesses a noble character, but, having been subjected to grave misfortune, is unable to obtain complete happiness.” Aristotle gives the example of King Priam, which was unable to achieve the status of happiness, even if he was a noble character. Hence, Fortune as such is an “uncontrollable element that wields enough power to keep people from their desired ends.”<sup>10</sup>

Later on, the medieval Christian scholars SS. Augustine and Thomas d’Aquino had major difficulties in explaining exactly the opposite view. In their opinions fortune’s existence is almost completely denied, as “no event was wholly driven by chance.”

However, during the Middle Age, the concept of Fortune still attracts attention, even if Christianity realized a transformation of its “personality.” It was still seen as a woman, although Christianity transformed it in “an officer of God’s will” as a “terrifying instrument of divine providence.” Its interesting iconography no longer posted it as “fickle goddess” but a terrible “creature” (rather a “monster”) with different faces or with many arms and legs.<sup>11</sup> The “Wheel of Fortune” is, of course, an important part of this medieval iconography.

<sup>8</sup> Hanna Pitkin, quoted in Tina Enhoffer, “Chances are – The Role of Fortune in Jane Austin’s Novels,” p. 1, available from <http://www.jasna.org/pol01/enhoffer.html>, Internet, accessed June 16, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> See the footnote 7.

<sup>10</sup> See the footnote 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p.p. 1-2. See concerning the iconography of Fortune, [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/themes/fortune/fortune\\_wheel.shtml](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/themes/fortune/fortune_wheel.shtml), Internet, accessed June 17, 2003.

The fifteenth century represents in this respect an interesting “turning-point.” The mercantile society, from the “Quattrocento” on, realized a transformation of the concept that is no more related to Fortune as a “transcendental order” (to use a Kantian phrase), as a “preordained fate,” or, finally, as a “Providential divine” that is “ruling over the incessant permutations of human affairs.” In this period Fortune is seen as “an active player in the reallocation of material wealth and happiness.”<sup>12</sup>

In Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, for example, Fortune is viewed as one of the three “Forces” or “Laws” that have a fundamental role in ruling the world. The other two are “Intelligence” and “love” and, as it was argued, “from the action and the interaction of these three forces spring all the mishaps and vicissitudes that the various novellas recount.” Even those who narrates the wonderful stories from *Decameron* had to obey its power, although they are the ones who choose what stories to tell.<sup>13</sup>

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is another example in this respect. The most quoted passage concerning the concept of Fortune is, of course, from *Inferno* VII, in which Virgilius is questioned about this term. In this canto Virgilius presents to Dante his opinion on the nature of Fortune, saying that

‘Your wisdom cannot withstand her: she foresees, judges, and pursues her reign, as theirs the other gods. Her changes know no truce. Necessity compels her to be swift, so fast do men come to their turns. This is she who is much reviled even by those who ought to praise her, but do wrongfully blame her and defame her. But she is blest and does not hear it. Happy with the other primal creatures she turns her sphere and rejoices in her bliss.’<sup>14</sup>

Fortune as an “angel” or as an “divine providence” are the main aspects attributed to the concept discussed. However, as it was asserted, this term begins to evolve toward an almost ‘naturalistic,’ if not yet entirely ‘materialistic’ and ‘relativistic,’ concept of *chance*: on the one hand, it expresses the irrational side of events, a warning to adventurous merchants travelling all over the (known and unknown) world in search of fortune; on the other, it stresses the importance of being ready to seize opportunity, in order to make their own fortune.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Themes & Motifs: Fortuna,” p. 1, available from [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/themes/fortune/fortune.shtml](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/themes/fortune/fortune.shtml), Internet, accessed June 17, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 7.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 12.

During the Modern times, the concept of Fortune “suffers” other transformations, an interesting example being Montesquieu himself who denied its decisive role in humans’ activities. In *Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des romains et de leur decadence* (1734), he emphasized that Fortune “plays no part at all, since it is not required to account for the failures of great leaders.” As Judith N. Shklar argued, Montesquieu’s history eliminated the great heroes, which had no importance (excepting the beginning of the state). After this very moment, the great rulers did not matter in his opinion. “If it had not been Caesar some other general would have done the republic in.” Fortune does not belong to his history.<sup>16</sup>

The very wide sense of the concept is narrowed closer to our times by Adam Smith, who simply attributes to the term the economical meaning, i.e. “the strict monetary sense.”<sup>17</sup>

Returning to Machiavelli, after this long but useful incursion in the exciting history of the concept, it must be said that, as Maurizio Viroli states, “the Great Florentine” belongs to his time by his opinions and this aspect should be beared in mind when analyzing his assertions.<sup>18</sup>

In Machiavelli’s opinion, Fortune is not the only one that is influencing humans’ lives. It is interesting that even God is “competing” with heaven and Fortune “for the privilege of intervening in human affairs, rather than using them both. Hence, according to him, human being is rather alone “in this world” being Fortune’s “victim.”<sup>19</sup> Despite this pessimistic view, Machiavelli adds another perspective than the accustomed points-of-view of his period. Following the dichotomy between Fortune and virtue offered by the Roman perspective, he argues that humans are able to avoid misfortunes by using their abilities and natural qualities. Machiavelli knew that in his times there was an opinion by which “the things of this world are so ordered by fortune and God that the prudence of mankind may effect little change in them.”<sup>20</sup>

If one is analyzing Machiavelli’s own life, he or she would have the opportunity to observe that Machiavelli himself could be treated as a “victim” of Fortune. Fortune decided for him to choose to deal with politics and not with something else in his life,<sup>21</sup> it decided for him to have, after a great

<sup>16</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *op.cit.*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>17</sup> Albert O. Hirschman, *op.cit.*, p.40.

<sup>18</sup> Maurizio Viroli, *op.cit.*, pp. 16-20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>20</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. and ed. by Thomas G. Bergin (New York: Appleton – Century – Crofts, Inc., 1947), ch.XXV, p. 72.

<sup>21</sup> As he explains in his letter to Vetori on April 9, 1513, Viroli, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

career, a “humble task,” that Machiavelli accepted “with irony and loyalty.”<sup>22</sup> This accept did not make him to renounce his plans of achieving once again a great position, *The prince* itself being an important example in this respect. It is known that this work was realized having the goal of impressing the potential leader of “Italy” (it seems like he had chosen Lorenzo di Medici for this important role) in order to regain his former political position.

Machiavelli believed that politics represent an effort “to construct a moral order” against “heaven’s overwhelming power” and “Fortune’s malignity.” Politics, seen as an “emancipatory force” from the rule of this “transcendental powers,” represent as well a fulfillment of “God’s desire.”<sup>23</sup> Having this in mind, he decided to write a kind of a “manual” for *The Prince*, in order to make his desirable achievements easier.

In his *Discourses on Livy* he believed that it was Fortune that favored Rome (that is personified!) to preserve “her” political achievements that made the difference between “her” and other states of that period.<sup>24</sup> *The Prince* (that was seen as a part of *The Discourses*) represents a development of his theory on “Fortuna” as he wanted to emphasize that “God does not want to do everything for us, so as not to deprive us of free will nor take from us that portion of glory which is ours.”<sup>25</sup>

However, he decided not to begin with the discussion on the concept of “Fortune” as he has other important issues to analyze first. He admitted that during mankind’s history, a great number of important religious, political and military men had Fortune’s favorable auspices, beginning with Moses and continuing with Romulus, Theseus and so on. Their “lucky opportunities” were profitable for them, as they were virtuous and courageous men and they knew how to take advantages on these opportunities in order to achieve great positions.<sup>26</sup>

However, those rulers that achieve their situations through the will and fortune of others will easily lose their situations as they “depend absolutely on the will or fortune of those who have raised them up.” At the “slightest misfortune” they will have to renounce their states, otherwise they will lose their lives as well. Only the “ecclesiastical monarchies” can avoid the malignant fortune, as they are founded on different basis than other types of states.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Viroli, *op.cit.*, p. 42, p. 173.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses*, trans. by Christian E. Detmold, (New York: Random House Inc., 1950), pp. 116-117.

<sup>25</sup> Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, pp. 14-15.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 17, p. 2, p. 27.

Of a great importance concerning the issue discussed in this paper is the chapter XXV, named "The influence of fortune on human affairs and how it may be countered." Although he discusses fortune within almost all the book, a special analysis is realized in this chapter, that is not by accident arranged by the author at the end of his work, before the final chapter that is more than a manifest for the liberty of Italy.

He explained that fortune is not an excuse for those rulers that did not succeed to preserve their states. Fortune controls only half of human actions as the other half (or almost half) could be controlled by men (if they are strong and clever enough to manage to eliminate the situation in which they are completely ruled by it). "Fortune is a woman" argues Machiavelli, and if men are virtuous enough to act according to "the spirit of their ages" and to impose her their own domination, they might succeed in achieving a great situation without being endangered by her potential wholly interference.

"It is better to be bold than cautious" when dealing with Fortune, states Machiavelli,<sup>28</sup> and I consider that these statements should not be accused of being "politically incorrect" as he was writing these in other times than ours. It will be an anachronism to start criticizing his assertions on present intellectual basis.

His work remains a "turning-point" in the history of political thinking, as his aim masterwrite a real presentation of how political life goes, without trying to idealize it. He chose to be a political realist instead of being an "revolutionary utopist,"<sup>29</sup> and his work should be analyzed as such.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> See the discussion on this phrase in Shklar, *op.cit.*, p.166.

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