

## FORTUNA AND THE CONSTITUTION

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Of the numerous pieces written on Machiavelli's Fortuna-figure most if not all have pictured her as a predominantly negative force or presence.<sup>1</sup> She is held to be destructive, violent, unreasonable and irrational. Even Hanna Pitkin's recent analysis, entitled 'Fortune is a Woman', purports to show that Machiavelli portrays Fortuna primarily negatively, to depict the odds against which the manly qualities of action and choice guard civilization's achievements.<sup>2</sup> Apart from messing up the world according to Machiavelli, she is often taken to mess up his own good sense. Ernst Cassirer, for one, considers Fortuna to be the breakdown of reason in Machiavelli's thinking.<sup>3</sup> Federico Chabod claims she is half mythical or mysterious.<sup>4</sup> Pitkin too finds her basically confusing.<sup>5</sup>

It is the aim of this paper to redress the balance by demonstrating that Fortuna in Machiavelli is not merely or even mainly an agent of disorder (in practice) or a locus of the irrational (in theory), but

<sup>1</sup> Th. Flanagan, 'The concept of *Fortuna* in Machiavelli' in *The Political Calculus*, ed. A. Parel (Toronto, 1972), 127-156, and the literature quoted there. Flanagan makes the observation that there is no wholly satisfactory specialized treatment on Machiavelli's Fortuna.

<sup>2</sup> H. Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman* (Berkeley, 1984), 138-169; esp. 146 and 169.

<sup>3</sup> E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, 1963), 157, following L.A. Burd, *Il Principe* (Oxford, 1891), 355.

<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli and the Renaissance, tr. David Moore (New York, 1965), 69-70.

<sup>5</sup> Pitkin, *op. cit.*, 160.

that there is a distinctive, non-mysterious intelligence in her operations as seen by Machiavelli, and that her acknowledged presence is both indispensable to good politics and a tribute to a sound political system.

This is not to support the revisionist assertion that Machiavelli's Fortuna is merely one of the 'technical terms of a rational system of political thought'.<sup>6</sup> It would seem to me that both the mythical and the rational picture of Fortuna in Machiavelli hinge on a frame of thinking which, rationalist, is fit neither to account for Machiavelli's concept of Fortuna, nor for his thinking on politics, nor perhaps for politics at all.

In this paper Machiavelli's Fortuna is presented as an agency or personality having, apart from other (destructive) qualities, a positively guiding influence on human affairs, especially in the context of politics. This implies two distinct things. First, practically, that some such agency is to the Florentine's mind an ingredient for sound politics; second, theoretically, that she is one of the keys to his understanding of politics. Let me add at this point that I am concerned here not only with the *system* of his thinking but also with its *wisdom*. Fortuna is a chapter in his teachings on politics which deserves to be taken to heart, even in conducting politics in the modern republic.

Fortuna's *political* portrait is drawn most explicitly in *The Prince's* famous chapter 25. Nevertheless it is the *Discourses*, the book celebrating the republic and constitutional politics, which in its scattered references provides Machiavelli's best and by any means most interesting insights on the subject.

### *A mechanics of events*

*The Prince* and the *Discourses* are the two books in which Machiavelli analyses politics in the abstract. *The Prince* is about autocracy. It concerns the methods by which a ruler gains and maintains control over a principality (i.e. a state which is not free in the sense that its inhabitants are not involved in its politics). It is the Prince

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. Olschki, *Machiavelli the Scientist* (Berkeley, 1945), 39.

who almost single-handedly and in any case single-mindedly wards off the dangers from inside and outside. The book pictures political rule in an emergency, where independence and unity have to be wrested from foreign dominance and from internal disorder and division. Quite naturally Fortuna in this setting takes on the role of a force of disorder and ruin, which has to be resisted, defeated, outwitted, or otherwise overcome, like other opponents. There is, however, the one difference that there is no hope of a total victory over Fortuna. She plays a cat and mouse game with the prince, always around the corner, leaving him at best halfway in control of things, if he is very smart, strong and alert (virtuous), but never fully so. Witness the famous passage:

I compare Fortune with one of our destructive rivers which, when it is angry, turns the plains into lakes, throws down the trees and the buildings [...] each one flees before the flood; everyone yields to its fury and nowhere can repel it. Yet though such it is, we need not therefore conclude that when the weather is quiet, men cannot take precautions with both embankments and dykes, so that when the waters rise, either they go off by a canal or their fury is neither so wild nor so damaging. The same things happen about Fortune. She shows her power where strength and wisdom do not prepare to resist her, and directs her fury where she knows that no dykes are ready to hold her. If you consider Italy – the scene of these variations and their first mover – you see that she is a plain without dykes and without any embankment; but if she were embanked with adequate strength and wisdom, like Germany, Spain, and France, this flood either would not make the great variations it does or would not come upon us. I think this is all I need to say in general on resisting Fortune.<sup>7</sup>

The *Discourses*, on the other hand, are not about autocracy but about mixed government in a free republic. They are a celebration of the ancient Romans' constitutional genius, with now and then an excursion to regimes of Machiavelli's day, such as France, Spain and Florence. In Rome (at the time of the republic), political power was shared between the Consuls, the Senate and the Tribunes, featuring *avant la lettre* a sort of *trias politica*, or system of checks and balances, and including the rule of law. Machiavelli aims to

<sup>7</sup> Tr. Allan Gilbert in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others* (Durham, NC, 1965), 1: 90.

demonstrate both the moral and the political qualities of this system, in which Fortuna had a key rôle.

Let me first offer some preliminary comments on his method of analysis. Not concerned with 'policies' nor with 'system', nor with 'factors' or 'actors', 'rules' or 'objectives', as is usual in our present-day political science, Machiavelli's method is best summarized as a 'mechanics of events'. Politics according to Machiavelli consists of events in the past and in the future; of mental, natural and worldly events. The discourses on Livy's first ten books 'will comprise what I [Machiavelli] have arrived at by comparing ancient with modern events, and think necessary for the better understanding of them'.<sup>8</sup>

An event is a self-contained structural unit of fact and concept which is present and represented as such in political history, and which by itself has force of permanence, in the way of a building or a book. An event is not to be reduced to the factors or lines of causation whose meeting it seems to represent, but has the capacity of associating different categories of meaning. Nor is it exhausted in the results it brings about. An event is an element not of causation but of time, not rendered by logic but by legend. An event always carries an element of novelty; it breaks or affects the state of things. But at the same time it has force of permanence. Events may be man-made, but not wholly so. Man is an 'agent of events',<sup>9</sup> though not indispensable. Fortuna is indispensable. She is one necessary ingredient for the creation of any event. Etymologically her name derives from the Latin verb *ferre*, which is cognate not just with the modern verb of *bringing* (as is often noticed<sup>10</sup>) but also with those of *bearing* and *giving birth*. As the goddess of birth she makes her presence felt whenever events create new situations, or when they reinvigorate existing ones.

<sup>8</sup> *Discourses*, preface to book I. Throughout I use the Penguin edition (London, 1983), based on the translation by Leslie Walker and with an introduction by Bernard Crick.

<sup>9</sup> *Discourses*, 3: 43.

<sup>10</sup> Flanagan, *op. cit.*, 129.

One of the most lucid pieces on Machiavelli that I know is by Robert Orr, entitled 'The Time Motif in Machiavelli', from which the following excerpt may indicate what I mean by 'a mechanics of events':

Man, as Machiavelli sees him in society, inhabits a world ruled neither by fortune nor by himself, but by time. [...] By time, he understands the succession of events, not of moments or of other regularly measurable intervals. [...] The life of a man or of a society is not *one* series of events [...] but many. In this respect the life of a man and of a state are formally similar. Both have a physical life, which has a beginning, a middle and an end; but neither restricts its life to the time-series of physical events. There is the series of conscious thoughts (the succession of mental events), the series of chemical events, of legal events, of defensive or military events, likely more if anyone wanted to discover them.

A man's life is up to a point comparable to a person standing astride a narrow channel, through which a river carrying many objects has to pass. He has to do something with each, and to do so effectively, he has to keep an eye upstream.

The analogy has at least two limitations:

1. Time is not just a river-like medium carrying the events, it *is* the events themselves.
2. There are good reasons for looking at a man himself as a passing event, enjoying no privileged point of arrest in the process.<sup>11</sup>

Machiavelli's wisdom is no table of causes, objectives and results, in the way of a modern science, which fortune, chance etc. may only disturb; it is a record of events or cases, in which fortune has a natural part. He likens it to the art of lawyers and physicians: 'For the civil law is nothing but a collection of decisions, made by jurists of old, which the jurists of today have tabulated in orderly fashion for their instruction'. Men of politics likewise should look to antiquity for examples.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Originally in *Political Studies* (June, 1969); repr. in *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought*, ed. M. Fleischer (New York, 1972), 185-208. Cf. 188-189.

<sup>12</sup> *Discourses*, preface to book 1.

*Fortune and the Constitution*

One of the merits of Orr's analysis is that it brings us straight to the point of how Machiavelli valued the constitution, the core of his attention in the Discourses:

The mental events with which Machiavelli is concerned are those that are responses to events that still lie in the future, i.e. to possibilities. [...] All responses are immediate, i.e. they are provoked by what is to hand; but some are remote as well, because they are a response not only to events which are before us but also to others as yet some distance ahead. For instance, the opening of a bank account is a response both to the immediate availability of cash and to more remotely anticipated needs. *In statecraft, the supreme example of a response that is both immediate and remote is the creation of a constitution. A constitution is a temporal device – it is itself an event – made to regulate the sequences of legal and political events.* [my emphasis].<sup>13</sup>

On the basis of this frame of thinking in temporal terms we may now proceed to discuss the role of Fortune in the establishment and upkeep of a constitutional republic. Even Orr, unequalled for analytical insight in the interplay of man and Fortuna, lends her a predominantly *negative* role as concerns the constitution. While generally granting that 'She is commended [...] as capable of being treated as a partner with men in arranging the sequence of events in secular time' and thus allowing for the possibility that fortune plays a positively constructive role, this line is not held as concerns the constitution. The constitution is a primarily defensive instrument directed at the threats emanating from Fortuna. 'For a civilian government, the prime way of digging in is by establishing a constitution able to meet a sudden spate'.<sup>14</sup> The following comments take their cue from Orr's line of discovery. They are in two parts. The first, 'Fortuna's gifts', is about her autonomous share in the politics of the republic. The second, 'Fortuna solicited', is about ways for man actively to seek her presence in republican politics.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 199 and 201. The analytical model of the interplay of man and fortune, featuring three distinct phases, is found in Orr, *op. cit.*, 201-205.

*Fortuna's gifts*

Between Fortuna and the republican institutions there is mutual furtherance. On the one hand 'good institutions lead to good fortune'.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand Fortune brings good institutions. Fortune's 'first gift' in this respect is the good lawgiver such as Solon or Lycurgus; and lacking such men, as in the case of Rome, she proffers her 'second gift', chance. In the case of Rome this has come in the form of friction between the plebs and the senate, which produced so many developments that 'chance effected what had not been effected by a lawgiver'.<sup>16</sup> This friction created primitive institutions which could then be perfected by Romulus and the rest of the kings. What was not provided by internal unrest was added by Rome's neighbours, 'who in their desire to crush her, caused her to set up institutions which not only enabled her to defend herself but also to attack them with greater force, counsel and authority'.<sup>17</sup> Tuscany suffers from the misfortune of having received neither the first nor the second gift and ending up in weakness and disorder, having no constitution.<sup>18</sup>

Whether the first cause of a good order is man's virtue or Fortuna's favour is left open. At times it is individual's *virtù* which moves things forward, as in the expansion of Rome,<sup>19</sup> at other times it is 'fortune [who] arranges this quite nicely. For, when it wants a man to take the lead in doing great things, it chooses a man of high spirits and great virtue who will seize the occasion it offers him'.<sup>20</sup> One thing is certain: fortune, like virtue, is essential if anything good is to ensue. Fortune makes the republic strong, sometimes by providing the opportunity for creating good institutions, sometimes by chastising it and teaching it her lessons.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Discourses*, 1: 11 and 1: 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 34. The interesting aside here is that good institutions not only make for internal stability but also for outward strength.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Discourses*, 2: 1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2: 29.

<sup>21</sup> *Discourses*, 2: 29 and 3: 1.

Fortuna is different from her partner in politics, virtue, in many ways. To name a few: she lacks memory, keeps no record, is illiterate, unstable and irresponsible. This is connected to her status of being ever nascent; she carries in Nietzsche's terms the 'innocence of becoming' (*die Unschuld des Werdens*). But it does not make her into virtue's perfect opposite nor into 'a deforming force which reduced everything to disorder in time', as held to be by Pocock.<sup>22</sup> True, the intelligence of Fortune, showing in events, is not the same as the intelligence of logical reason; it is more archaic, medieval if you will. But not being rational does not automatically mean being a mere force of disorder. Unmistakable elements of order in Fortuna herself come to evidence from a comparison with virtue, the chief agency which Machiavelli credits with bringing order, and Fortuna's partner in arranging events. These elements comprise articulation, fairness and openness.

Like virtue, Fortuna is articulate, able and willing to express herself. She makes or breaks men according to their virtue and their conformity to the times. A republic enjoys better fortune than a principality since it adapts itself to the times.<sup>23</sup> Among her favours are the service of bringing clarity and distinction, even to virtue; 'the virtue of the builder is discernible in the fortune of what was built'.<sup>24</sup> Generally, in its operation, Fortuna is clear-cut and avoids the middle road, behaving according to Machiavelli's favourite precept (or he according to hers). Chance lies next to choice.<sup>25</sup> Like her partner she is playful (even fair), not counting on always winning but ready to surrender to superior wit and force. She is even-handed, descending on everyone alike without distinction other than by quality and fitness, though preferring the ambitious and strong, like a good sport. Having no memory anyway she is not a bad loser and, fickle, her services may not be bought.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, 'Custom and Grace, Form and Matter: A. Approach to Machiavelli's Concept of Innovation', in Fleischer, *op. cit.*, 161.

<sup>23</sup> *Discourses*, 3: 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Discourses*, 1: 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Discourses*, 2: 13.

<sup>26</sup> See Orr, *op. cit.*, 201-205, for the rules of her game.

Lastly she shares virtue's public character, in the sense of acting openly. Although ever trying to jump on you, when she does so she is above-board and appears distinctly, for everyone to see. Not acting in the way of calumny but charging openly, Fortune is intent on 'showing what it can do'.<sup>27</sup>

These qualities (articulation, fairness and openness) distinguish Machiavelli's secular Fortuna from her introverted and inscrutable medieval counterpart, and at the same time make her a favourite guest and partner of the open society. As much as she herself may engender good institutions, she may be solicited by these to perform under their control.

### *Fortuna solicited*

One unattainable ideal is the republic which 'by its laws has provided for all contingencies'.<sup>28</sup> It is a realistic policy to remain on your guard by legally enforcing discipline and to be in a position to deal with the events when they are upon you. Strong institutions do not only ward off events and surprise, but even generate them by way of public decrees, thus actively involving Fortuna in their city's politics.<sup>29</sup> The idea is to draw on her powers and qualities to strengthen the republic and make it more versatile than a principality.

The institutional techniques of inviting Fortuna may be brought under three (related) headings: conflict, change and renewal. Conflict is valued in its own right by Machiavelli: 'Hence if tumults led to the creation of the tribunes, tumults deserve the highest praise, since, besides giving the populace a share in the administration, they served as the guardian of Roman liberties'.<sup>30</sup> As we have noted, it was Fortuna who brought this about in the first place. By giving arms to the populace, Rome invited

<sup>27</sup> *Discourses*, 1: 8; 3: 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 34.

<sup>29</sup> 'Events due to public decrees' are the subject of Book One of *the Discourses* (1: 1).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 4.

endless opportunities for commotion. On the other hand, had the government of Rome been such as to bring greater tranquillity, there would have ensued this inconvenience, that it would have been weaker, owing to its having cut off the source of supply which enabled it to acquire the greatness at which it arrived.<sup>31</sup>

The essence of mixed government as put forward by Machiavelli is not to avoid the evils of the Polybian cycle (in which each system of government is perverted in turn), but to attract the advantages of a mixed system of separation of powers or a *trias politica*, with greater external authority than the non-mixed systems as well as a domestic system of checks and balances. 'Lycurgus is one of those who have earned no small measure of praise for constitutions of this kind. For in the laws which he gave to Sparta, he assigned to the kings, to the aristocracy, and to the populace each its own function'.<sup>32</sup> The institutions, once put into place, should serve to perpetuate but also keep in check the unrest which led to their creation. One of their important functions is to bring into the open such underground disaffection as may cause sedition, by providing a public platform to vindicate them. Thus the truth and the facts are allowed to override feelings. The populace may be ignorant, but it is capable of grasping the truth when a man, worthy of confidence, lays the truth before it.<sup>33</sup>

Second, apart from inviting and regulating conflict, the institutions should foster articulate change and adaptation. In this respect Athens and Sparta fell short in comparison with Rome which, applying force to integrate neighbouring populations, 'sought as a good farmer does, who, that a plant may grow big [...] cuts off the first branches [...] so that its roots may gather virtue'.<sup>34</sup> This precept is much similar to Fortune's own above-mentioned technique of chastising its elect city to near-death in order that it grow big and strong (as per Goethe's dictum 'Was mich nicht tötet, stärket mich').

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Discourses*, 2: 3.

In the third place there is the idea of the republic forcing renewal upon itself through its institutions. This is argued at the beginning of book III of the *Discourses*. Those states 'are better constituted and have a longer life whose institutions make frequent renovations possible'. Of course they may also be 'brought to such a renovation by some event which has nothing to do with their constitution', but we are concerned with events which at least in part are induced by institutions, or 'events due to public decrees'.<sup>35</sup> 'The way to renovate them [...] is to reduce them to their starting point.' This is done by creating or inducing events (and necessarily fortune). It is

essential that men who live together under any constitution should frequently have their attention called to themselves either by some external or by some internal occurrence. When internal, such occurrences are usually due to some law which from time to time causes the members of this body to review their position; or again by some good man who arises in their midst and by his example and his virtuous deeds produces the same effect as does the constitution.

One of the induced events for bringing men back to the mark is a periodic, legally induced change of government: 'those who governed the state of Florence from 1434 to 1494 used to say that it was necessary to reconstitute the government every five years; otherwise it was difficult to maintain it'. The purpose was to renew its legitimacy, which could be a matter of freshly instilling that terror and fear with all concerned which had accompanied the original creation of the state.

The idea of legitimacy is different from ours. In our modern democracies the periodic change is induced by the event of an election. But the essence of the procedure is no different: is to create events bringing the whole of the political community back to the mark.

It may be that in accounting for the importance and authority of elections the idea of their being an event and consequently of their borrowing on Fortune has faded. Machiavelli would remind us of this. Three qualities especially for which we value the electoral verdict, to wit its precision, its fairness and its public character are

<sup>35</sup> *Discourses*, 1: 1. All the other quotes in this section from 3: 1.

inherent as much in its status of being a constitutionally induced event as in that of being an expression of the popular will.

If one looks for a single essential message in Machiavelli's discussion of Fortuna in the *Discourses* it is perhaps that human intelligence (and especially politics) cannot be trusted to run human affairs alone; just like any single intelligence, it is incapable of change, of moderation and of criticism. It needs to be disturbed, to be forced to adapt, to be challenged by exterior forms of intelligence, thus avoiding to become self-centred, complacent and corrupt. Human reason trusting only itself breeds a closed society. Human institutions should invite rather than ward off other sources of intelligence, even if this is risky and costly, because the cost of corruption is greater than that of bad luck and even misery, and because the open society is stronger than the closed society. Machiavelli's Fortuna suitably sums up what it takes and what it gains to subject politics to the mechanics of events.