

### **Machiavelli's Republican Theory**

#### ***Discussion questions:***

1. Is Machiavelli right that it is impossible to empower the people without accepting constant strife?
2. Are republics actually more adaptable than principalities to changing circumstances?

#### ***Background concepts***

- ❖ Human desires are universally extensive, but scarcity guarantees conflict and perpetual change (2.p)
- ❖ All human affairs “are in continual motion and cannot remain fixed, they must either rise or fall (1.6)
  - “the times rather than men create disorder” (1.47)
- ❖ The flux of fortune can be held in check by virtù, but “when men possess little of that exceptional ability, fortune shows her power all the more” (2.30)
  - “the cause of the bad and good fortune of men lies in how well their mode of conduct fits the times” (3.9)
- ❖ The good conditions that give rise to a republic will not last forever; “in the course of time that goodness is corrupted, if something does not come about to bring it back to its proper limits, it will, of necessity, kill that body.” (3.1)
  - The cure is for such states to return to their beginnings and “renew themselves often through their own institutions” or by the actions of gifted individuals (3.1)

#### ***Initial mechanism***

- ❖ True constitutional change is only possible in times of crisis
  - “they will never reorganize themselves, unless...a certain necessity shows them it is required.” (1.2)
- ❖ The ideal polity contains a blending of elements, in different proportions at different times, adapting flexibly to changing circumstances (1.2)
- ❖ Machiavelli adapts the Greek theory of the cycle of constitutions, but with significant differences:
  - Not a progression from one thing to another, nor a cycle, just constant change and uncertainty (Crick p.52)
  - States must expand, they can't sit still (1.6)
- ❖ If institutions fail to constrain corruption of the republic, it must be reformed by a prince
  - But once reformed, republican government is more likely to ensure the state's survival
    - “although one man alone is capable of instituting a government, what he has instituted will not long endure if it rests upon the shoulders of a single man, but it endures when it remains a matter of concern to many and when it is the task of many to maintain it.” (1.9)
    - If a prince must rule, his succession should be adoptive and not hereditary (1.10)
    - The best princes will be constrained by institutions (1.16)
- ❖ There are three types of good governments, each with a corrupt counterpart.
  - Good: principality, aristocracy and democracy
  - Corrupt: tyranny, oligarchy, anarchy
- ❖ But the pure forms are likely to slip easily into the corrupted form because the animating virtue of each of the good forms is similar to the animating vice of the bad forms
  - “no remedy can prevent it from slipping into its contrary due to the similarity that exists...between the virtue and the vice” (1.2)
- ❖ The solution is to combine the three good types and create a dynamic equilibrium which will be “steadier and more stable” because “one keeps watch over the other” (1.2)

### ***Dynamic equilibrium***

- ❖ This dynamic equilibrium among the three elements of society makes the state better able to respond to changing circumstances, and encourages incremental constitutional evolution (1.3)
  - But there will be constant low-level strife. (1.5)
    - “make room for the disturbances and disagreements” (1.6)
  - This strife emerges from the empowerment of the people, and is necessary to have a citizen army (1.6)
    - “it is necessary, in order to hold on to a government and to maintain a republic or a kingdom, to arm oneself with one’s own subjects” (1.43)
    - Such a state will have an easier time engaging in the constant expansion Machiavelli deems necessary
- ❖ Republics are better able to adapt themselves to diverse circumstances
  - “a republic has a longer life...because it can more easily adapt itself to the diversity of circumstances” (3.9)
- ❖ The desires of a free people “are rarely harmful to liberty” since they mainly wish to avoid oppression (1.4)
  - The people “commit less serious errors than the prince” (1.59)
  - “if there is a surplus of good, it resides in the people” (1.58)
- ❖ But republics also depend on the virtue of the citizens
  - “where this goodness does not exist, nothing can be hoped for” (1.55)
  - Where citizens are corrupt, republics are impossible
    - “how easily men may be corrupted” (1.42)
    - “where the material is not corrupt, disturbances and other disorders can do no harm, and where the material is corrupt, carefully enacted laws do no good” (1.18)
  - Beyond a certain level of corruption, the state can only be restored by a prince (1.17)
    - Weak states make decisions slowly and badly (2.15)
    - “once a city has begun to decline through the corruption of its substance, if it ever manages to rise again, this occurs through the exceptional ability of a single man...and not through the exceptional ability of the people as a whole” (1.17)

### ***Conditions for republics***

Republics are only appropriate in political contexts where there exist:

- ❖ A large, urban middle class with a tradition of equality (1.55, Crick p.41)
  - “The founder of a republic should...organize it where there exists or has existed great equality” (1.55)
  - Inequalities of wealth and power make men “too proud or too desperate” or they won’t play by the rules
    - “if a man is greatly offended either by the state or by a private person and is not avenged to his own satisfaction, he will, if he lives in a republic, seek to avenge himself, even if it results in the republic’s ruin” (2.28)
- ❖ Respect for religion and tradition (1.25)
  - The Romans “feared breaking an oath more than breaking the laws” (1.11)
  - “how useful religion was in controlling the armies, in giving courage to the plebeians, in keeping men good, and in shaming the wicked” (1.11)
  - “since what is new may change men’s minds, you must arrange it so that these alterations retain as much of the ancient ways as possible” (1.25)
  - “there was as yet no sign of our modern skepticism, which interprets solemn compacts...to suit its own convenience” (1.13)

- “just as good customs require laws in order to be maintained, so laws require good customs in order to be observed.” (1.18)
- ❖ Civic spirit/pride (virtù)
  - Rely on a set of classical virtues, including:
    - Primacy of the political sphere (2.2)
    - Respect for action (2.2)
  - These are at odds with Christian virtues
    - Humility, temperance, privacy (2.2)
      - “Our religion has more often glorified humble and contemplative men, [and] defined the supreme good as humility, abjection and contempt of worldly things; ancient religion located it in greatness of mind, strength of body, and in all the other things pat to make men the strongest.” (2.2)
    - Machiavelli blames this for the decline of civic pride in his era
- ❖ Institutions constraining popular power
  - Free institutions must build on something; they cannot be simply invented (1.25)
    - This is why religion is so important – it is a foundation and disguise for innovation (1.12)
  - Institutions must change as the state becomes more or less corrupt (1.18)
    - “just as the city [Rome] had created new laws in the course of its existence, it should also have created new institutions” (1.18)
  - Popular power should not dominate, but it also cannot be ignored
- ❖ “increasing the number of inhabitants...making allies and not subjects, sending colonies to watch over acquired territories, making capital out of the spoils of war, subduing the enemy with raids and battles rather than sieges, keeping the public treasury wealthy and private citizens poor, and sustaining military training with the highest degree of diligence would be the true path to making a republic great and acquiring power.” (2.19)

### ***Results of republics***

- ❖ “it is not the private good but the common good that makes cities great” and “the common good is pursued only in a republic” (2.2)
- ❖ “each man willingly procreates”, “wealth will be seen to increase more rapidly”, “public benefits... increase at a miraculous rate” (2.2)

### ***Threats to republics***

- ❖ “Anyone who creates a tyranny without killing Brutus, and anyone who creates a free government and does not kill the sons of Brutus, will not sustain himself for long.” (3.4)
- ❖ “A wicked citizen cannot do evil in a republic that is not corrupted” (3.8)
- ❖ “The downfall of cities also arises from their failure to modify the institutions of their republics over time” (3.9)

### ***Further Reading***

McCormick, John P. “Machiavellian Democracy: Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism.” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No.2 (June 2001)

Clarke, Michelle T. “The Virtues of Republican Citizenship in Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*.” *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 75, No.2 (April 2013)

Skinner, Quentin et. al. “Machiavelli and Republicanism.” *Cambridge University Press* (1993)