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The common good as an invisible hand: Machiavelli’s legacy to public management

Claude Rochet

Abstract
Public management has been dominated by the quest for efficiency and has left us with fundamental ethical questions that remain unresolved. It is argued that Machiavellian thought may provide us with concepts and tools applicable to ruling societies confronted with uncertainties and change that are (1) in line with the most recent insights into institutional evolution and (2) appropriate to solve complex decision-making problems. The common good — a central concept of Machiavelli’s thought — appears to be an invisible hand that lowers the transaction costs and acts as the keystone of complex public affairs thinking. This analysis is illustrated by a comparative case study of the two management projects of infrastructure crossing the Alps, the AlpTransit in Switzerland, and the Lyon Torino Link. It concludes with a proposal to upgrade the research program in public management that allows effectiveness (legitimacy of the ends) and effectiveness in its implementation.

Points for practitioners
The mainstream of public management theories and reform has been dominated by the quest of efficiency as a Holy Grail. I argue that theses reforms didn’t deliver with their promises and left us with fundamental ethical questions unresolved: *doing things right* do not answer to the question of *doing the right things*. The main reason is a profound misunderstanding of the very nature of the ongoing change process that makes any kind one size fits all recipes inappropriate. Such a sea change occurred in the Renaissance era and Machiavelli bequeathed us a comprehensive understanding of how to rule a public body in a changing and uncertain world. I explain Machiavelli’s misunderstood legacy and apply his...
teaching to analyzing two huge management projects of public infrastructures. I conclude on what has to be upgrade in the research programmes in public management to confront with the challenges of our era that call for a back to basics of classical political philosophy.

**Keywords:** civic values, ethics, Machiavelli, NPM, political philosophy, research program, virtù

‘... not the individual good, but the common good is what makes Cities great. And, without doubt, this common good is not observed except in Republics. (Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, 2)

Public management has been dominated for about the last 20 years by a ‘managerialist’ trend known as new public management (NPM). I call ‘managerialism’ the belief that the problems public management has to deal with may be solved by the implementation of a set of tools and techniques, which bring together proven off-the-shelf tools that are supposed to form a ‘new paradigm’ in public administration and to give birth to universal ‘good governance’ practices (Gruening, 1998).

NPM has made the ‘old public management’, the Weberian state, its *bête noire* (Drechsler, 2005a), although it shares with it its feature most open to criticism, axiological neutrality based on a separation between facts and values (Strauss, 1986). It is accused of cutting off public administration from its vital roots in political philosophy (Gruening, 1998). Where NPM really departs from the Weberian model is in ‘the role of the state as the main facilitator of solutions to the new problems of globalization, technological change, shifting demographics, and environmental threat’ (Drechsler, 2005a). In the NPM mindset, the State no longer acts as an architect in the service of the common good.

NPM is the final outcome of a process that originated in the rise of the neoclassical economy after the Second World War, and mainly in the offensive against the welfare state that resulted in a rejection of classical public administration. The notions of ‘public interest’ and ‘common good’ came under fire from scholars belonging to the public choice school, the neoclassical economy, and the methodological individualism, although a minority of scholars attacked the separation of facts and values. On the one side, NPM didn’t solve the critical issue which is the only real NPM specific to the set of tools it recommended, electronic government (Dunleavy et al., 2005), and on the other side, this supposed paradigm shift based on individual financial incentive has left unresolved fundamental questions about ethics and the integrity of governance.

I argue that these unanswered questions call for a back to basics approach on ‘what works in ruling a public body’ and that many of these may be found in Machiavellian thought which paves the way for an amazing comprehension of the complex modern world.

First, I will explain Machiavellian thought and what its legacy may be to present problems of public administration. Second, I will set out the present-day problems public management is confronted with in the transition toward the third industrial revolution and the links that may be established between the Machiavellian legacy and contemporary institutional and evolutionary theories. Third, I will consider how a
Machiavellian moment in public management may come into existence that allows a link to be made between institutional development and practical decision-making in complex public issues. Fourth, I will apply this model to analyze a case study in complex decision-making, the project of rail infrastructure across the Alps. Fifth, I will conclude on the need to update the research program in public management.

The legacy of Machiavelli

As Claude Lefort (1972) put it, understanding Machiavelli is working on an interpretation of how he supposed his writings would be understood, as well how his works have been interpreted. One cannot read Machiavelli without bearing in mind common previous and nefarious interpretations. There is, to put it in Straussian words, an exoteric (easily understandable) reading of Machiavelli and an esoteric one, which necessitates interpretation. I will focus on what is beyond any doubt in Machiavellian thought according to the new Machiavellian research.

Machiavelli’s concern was how to sustain a republican state dedicated to the common good. The common good, or common weal, is not a utilitarian concept, as understood in modern concepts like ‘general interest services’, but the moral and political condition of public life. Machiavelli conceived himself to be a forerunner in political thinking and to be, through a highly complex situation, the founder of the resumption of the power of human reason in understanding an uncertain real (Discourses, I).

According to Machiavelli, men are not good or bad, but long for security and personal achievement that can be gained only by the union of them all. The only natural good is the private good–public good, or common weal, res publica, is politically constructed. This construction depends on whether there is a founder, represented by the figure of the Prince that ideally Machiavelli describes in The Life of Castruccio Castracani — on whether the political regime is a monarchy or a republic — which builds the institutions allowing the common good to exist, or on a political leader that will act as a refounder when the republic and the people have become corrupt and cannot exist anymore. Habits of being good are not natural but need to be created by institutions provided by a founder. Machiavelli admired founders such as Lycurgus who provided both good and stable institutions to Sparta. But he also praised the foundation of the republic in Rome that was made step by step through struggles between the noble patricians and the plebe (Discourses, I–VI).

Machiavelli explains that a good society may be enforced by the virtù of the leader but it necessitates the sharing of civic values by the people (Discourses, I–XII). Institutions are necessary as educators of civic values and to sustain the pursuit of the ideal of the good society when those values are no longer alive within the spirit of the leader and within the people. ‘The People’ (popolo) only exist as a politically educated mass under the leadership of a Prince, a man of rare brain and an authority dedicated to building the common good, motivated by moral virtue, even if — and it is the most commonly misinterpreted legacy of Machiavelli — he is moved by his natural selfish desire to acquire glory in history.

This tension between the people and the leader (the Prince) is central in Machiavellian thought. It does not advocate any constitutional theory of the republic.
since it does not think in terms of formal institutions. It was used to serve a weak republic, Florence, which was supposed to be the heir of the Roman republic, and it considered this weakness as a problem of ethos: the ability of the small and medium bourgeoisie to collectively debate about public affairs and to promote leaders out of them (History of Florence). The common good is the good of the many, since if it is the good of the few that will equate to the good of the Prince and of his sycophants.

To sum up: ‘the common good consists in a precarious harmony between the good of the many and the good of the great’ (Strauss, 1958: 271). This harmony can only be granted in a ‘well-ordered’ (bene ordinata) republic based on a dynamic interaction between institutions and citizens. In his History of Florence, Machiavelli clearly opposes the tumults that appeared in Rome and in Florence: in Florence, political instability was rooted in the fight between ruling class factions that led to chaos that was different from real class interests. In Rome, on the contrary, political conflicts reflected real class conflicts that are necessary to the vitality of a republic. Despite his infatuation with political stability, Machiavelli believed in the creative possibilities of class conflicts that he considered to be an immutable characteristic of republican political life (Brudney, 1984). This conflict was institutionalized in Rome with the creation of the Tribunes, which made a place for the popular part of the government proving beneficial to the strength and the stability of the republic (Discourses 1.4.1: 204). Machiavelli is quite radical, both in our time and in 16th-century Florence:

I say that those who condemn the dissension between the nobility and the people seem to me finding fault with what as a first course kept Rome free, and to be considering quarrels and the noise that resulted from these dissensions rather than the good effect they brought about, they are not considering that, in every republic there are two opposed faction, that of the people and that of the rich, and that all laws made in favor of liberty result from their discord. (Discourses, 1.4.1: 202–3)

This point has clearly been minimized, or ignored, by the mainstream interpretation of Machiavelli’s teaching, which was limited to The Prince and reduced its interpretation to a manual of cynicism in the art of government. One has to keep in mind that The Prince was written after The Discourses, which clearly gives praise to the republican regime. As clearly demonstrated by Leo Strauss (1958: 282), one of the shrewdest critics of Machiavelli, both of his most read books — The Prince and The Discourses — are republican, even if, in The Prince, he seems to act as an adviser to tyrants. The Prince may be considered an extract of The Discourses dedicated to the subtlest political situation when a new principality has to be built without any legitimacy acquired by history and tradition (Zarka and Ménissier, 2001: 32). As Cassirer put it (1946: 153), The Prince is neither moral nor immoral: it describes things as they are. Machiavelli wants the power to be effective. But, following Lefort’s interpretation (1972: 202), Cassirer fails in reading Machiavelli as Machiavelli read Livy or Aristotle: he pretends to have an unbiased and timeless view of his thought and reaches the conclusion that Machiavelli invents the state as independent of any kind of religion and metaphysical consideration. This conclusion is at the origin of Leo Strauss’s reading of Machiavelli. Following the precursory works of Felix Gilbert (1984), the Cambridge school (Hans Baron, J.G. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Philip Pettit — on the Anglophone side—
Mauricio Viroli — on the Italian side — and Jean Fabien Spitz — on the French one) has clearly situated Machiavelli’s republicanism within the scope of the Renaissance civic humanism based on the Aristotelian tradition as rediscovered in the trecento (Brunetto Latini, Jean de Viterbe, Marsiglio da Padova, Thommaso d’Aquino, etc.).5 Others (Maynor, 2002; McCormick, 2003, 2007) criticize the Cambridge School’s interpretation for minimizing Machiavellian republicanism as both participatory and contestable and being closer to Isaiah Berlin’s (1990) ‘negative liberty’ than the republican ‘positive liberty’ concepts, and not elucidating the difference with the concept of representative democracy. It is crystal clear that contemporary modern democracy, theorized by the Federalist Papers, is at odds with the classical republican tradition of people’s direct participation in public affairs: people are to participate but only indirectly and infrequently through elections and jury duty in a democracy based on individual rights and the commercial spirit (Pangle, 1986: 596).

But, beyond any doubt, Machiavellian innovation is, according to Quentin Skinner (1990, 2001), the creation of the vivere politico. In the Aristotelian political philosophy, virtue is the supreme end of man that will be achieved through civic activity, the vivere civile. The Machiavellian vivere politico is not an ethical end but a means to defend civic liberty and the multiple ends of individuals so as to maintain the stability of the state in a troubled period favorable to the decay of a republic.6

In the context of a changing world, political observers were disappointed, acknowledging their inability to foresee the course of events (Letter to Vettori, 9 April 1513). Louis XII, the King of France, failed in his Italian endeavor, being the victim of uncertainty. So, politics needs a professional practice that will fit uncertainty: politics becomes an arte dello stato — of which Machiavelli declares it was his unique occupation — an organized profession similar to the Florentine organization of wool weavers, l’arte della lana (letter to Vettori, 10 December 1513). In Machiavelli’s republicanism, the state exists as an end in itself but continues thanks to civil liberty and the active participation of the people: there is a clear co-evolution between the strength of the state and civic activity, the vivere politico.

Virtù, fortuna, corruptio: the Machiavellian moment

Machiavelli defines three concepts that illuminate the basics in managing public affairs: fortuna, or uncertainty, virtù, or the alliance of civic virtue and the necessary strength to sustain and enforce a political system, and corruptio, which is the disappearance of civic values faced with the uncertainty of the fortuna. In Machiavelli’s words, corruptio does not have the modern utilitarian meaning (i.e. material corruption that impedes the fair distribution of contracts) but the loss of civic values that will permanently reconstruct the ideal of the common weal faced with the assaults of the fortuna. Fortuna permanently threatens the equilibrium of the republic. The future of the republic depends on the vitality of political life, the vita activa, and the sharing of civic values among citizens.

The stronger the civic values, the lower the transaction costs linked to the enforcement of institutions. As Pocock (2003) points out, there are, in the development of societies, Machiavellian moments that are the gathering of these three conditions — virtù of the leader, the sharing of civic values among citizens that makes every virtue
reinforced by others, and capacity to face corruptio — which allow a republic to exist and, in fact, act as an invisible hand. These Machiavellian moments are not permanent, and societies rise and fall according to their ability to resist the assaults of fortuna, that is, the strength of civic values to resist corruptio. Machiavelli’s innovation is having freed virtù in action from Christian ethics. Action that works is virtuous: ethics must be concerned with the end, the common good and be disjointed from the means. His conception of virtù is akin to the Greek metis (intuition) and practical wit or prudence, phronesis (Gaille-Nikodimov and Ménissier, 2006: 269). A ruler is suited for office, on Machiavelli’s account, who is capable of varying his conduct from good to evil and back again ‘as fortune and circumstances dictate’ (Pocock, 2003). The prince is endowed with virtù as the warrior is with metis: both know how to turn circumstances to their advantage.

The virtuous republican leader and the people of citizens

Machiavelli gives us the important features of what a republican leader must be: first of all, an architect. The foundations of the city must be solid, in the institutional field as well as the physical field, giving incentives to virtuous behavior: Machiavelli recommends building dams and canals to fight destroying floods. Second, he knows how to build institutions appropriate to the particular ethos of the citizens and does not search for the form of the best political regime. He is concerned with the content of institutions and not with the form — as the classics were. Third, he is a physician who not only cures, but also principally prevents corruption by adapting the institutions. He must anticipate the coming of a bad fortuna so as to reinforce his virtù. The diagnostic is case specific according to circumstances, so as to facilitate adaptive institutional capacities.

To avoid the constitution of vested interests, the leader must come from the people as Machiavelli illustrates in his Life of Castruccio Castracani (1520), and public servants must rotate so as to equilibrate the common good of the few with the common good of the many through direct civic activity. He does not want to build a perfect regime of social harmony, but considers that the fight between social classes and diverging interests is normal and proof of an active civic life that will make the common good of the many triumph over the private good of the powerful (Gaille-Nikodimov and Ménissier, 2006: 274). In normal times, conflicts are necessary as part of the vivere politico. They do not endanger the state but reinforce it, since no republic can exist without passions and their organized expression. The renewal of civic virtue through conflicts generates a dynamic equilibrium distinct from an imposed princely order:

nor can a Republic in any way with reason be called disordered where there are so many examples of virtù, for good examples result from good education, good education from good laws, and good laws from those tumults which many inconsiderately condemn; for he who examines well the result of these, will not find that they have brought forth any exile or violence prejudicial to the common good, but laws and institutions in benefit of public liberty. (Discourses, I, 4)

In contemporary terms, Machiavelli’s republicanism belongs clearly to what Sir Isaïah Berlin has (negatively) coined ‘positive liberty’, as opposed to ‘negative liberty’ advo-
cated by the liberal stance since Hobbes and essentially since Locke: liberty consists in avoiding any hindrance to individual freedom on the part of the state. On the contrary, positive liberty is the capacity to act personally to produce subjective and collective rights. There is a connection between the common good and personal liberty, as Skinner (1992) puts it, opposing Machiavelli to John Rawls whose *Theory of Justice* only considers individuals’ rights, rejecting organizing cooperation and civic life as an undue burden for the state.

**The dynamics of change**

But the most noticeable innovation of Machiavelli is having introduced change into the dynamics of republican life: the perfect republic (*repubblica perfetta*) is able to modify its institutions when faced with disruptive mutations. Law becomes ineffective and needs to be reinstated, even, in the case of a major crisis, by appealing to a provisional dictator (i.e. a new Prince acting as a founding father) — as did the Roman republic — to refound the republican institutions.

We may read Machiavelli as a political philosopher — although he considered himself more a practitioner than a philosopher — who intended to reconcile the legacy of classical philosophy (the Aristotelian and Socratic aspiration for the good life, justice and the good society ruled by good laws) — with being effective in the changing and turbulent world of the Italian Renaissance and the beginning of an industrial era set in motion by technological innovation and the demise of the classics’ ideal of the stable world. As Eric Voegelin (1998) put it, Italy experienced many disruptions in Machiavelli’s time: the expansion of the Mongols westward and the French invasion in 1494. Being the center of the intellectual life of its time, Italy was not able to understand the situation. It was no longer possible to uphold the view of a one-way development of history as set up by the Augustinian model. Machiavelli turns to Roman history since he is conscious of this ineffectiveness, and sheds light on the non-linearity of history, the problem of cycles, periods of growth and decay that Voegelin calls ‘the course of national history’ (today evolutionary theorists would call this a phenomenon of ‘path dependency’; Nelson and Winter, 1982). ‘In so doing Machiavelli anticipates speculation on historical cycles, the *corsi* and *ricosi* of Vico, Edward Meyer, Spengler, Toynbee and, implicitly, of Voegelin himself’ (Moulakis, 2005).

Classical political philosophy, as theorized by Aristotle, rejected innovation and change, based on the assumption that life in society was a zero-sum game and that impoverishing a part of the society was a necessary drawback to creating wealth. Machiavelli introduced change and turbulence into the Socratic project of building a good society. Political conflicts and turbulence are necessary to face up to uncertainty and change. Civic values, both among the people and the leader, as well as the quality of civic life, are the invisible hand that may allow the system to find its equilibrium and reconstruct its resilience when faced with uncertainty.

**How relevant are Machiavelli’s lessons today?**

Machiavelli’s legacy has been erased by the ideology of ‘Machiavellism’ that was born with the religious wars. This ideology is unrelated to the real works of Machiavelli who, as Lefort put it, appear to be the victim of a time when the fire of religious
intolerance consumes all the works of thought and reclaims certainties based on faith (Lefort, 1986: I). The making of this ideology begins with Innocent Gentillet ‘Anti Machiavelli’ who assimilates Machiavelli’s legacy to the Saint Barthélémy massacre of the Huguenots by the Medicis when they ruled the court of the Kingdom of France. On the Catholic side, Giovanni Botero condemned Machiavelli’s abandonment of Christian ethics when considering the means of political action; while being the real theoretician of the raison d’etat contrary to Bodin’s sovereignty theory. King Frederic II of Prussia wrote his own ‘anti-Machiavelli’ work, prefaced by Voltaire, to illustrate that a Prince could be a good prince using the right means — and, in his case, he succeeded.

The modern liberal stance claimed with Montesquieu that ‘at last we got rid of Machiavelli’, praising the role of commerce as a more peaceful means of building good institutions, since commerce dismisses political passions and supposes equal partners. Hobbes was hostile to the republican conception of liberty and considered that there is no such thing as civic value in men outside the obedience to the state. Although Hobbes was a theorist of social virtues and claimed that their maintenance was indispensable to the preservation of peace, he wanted to embed it in a ‘science of Vertue and Vice’ (Skinner, 1996). Being the fruit of reason, this science, faced with interest and ignorance, has little chance of being listened to. He reduces democratic debate to the art of eloquence, which is sufficient to seduce the multitude, and dismisses the entire period of the English revolution as nothing better than an era of insanity (Skinner, 1996). Locke, who established that the individual interest of the owner was the best regulator of public life, completes this evolution: the political question is replaced by the question of property in the new modern political philosophy.

The Renaissance put an end to the scholastic view of human action being ruled by a cosmic order, and freed human creativity to pave the way for an economy based on innovation. Ernst Cassirer (1946: 129–33) considers that Machiavelli studied the political movements in the same spirit as Galileo would, one century later, with the laws of gravity, and he was the first to break with the scholastic view of an unchanging world and succeed in encompassing the role of the state in a mutable world. However, as argued by many critics of modernity (Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Eric Voegelin, Raymond Aron, etc.) the modern technological era gave birth to new beliefs in the laws of nature relying on technique, such as those professed by the positivists and classical economists such as Auguste Comte — for whom ‘observation came about dominating imagination and dethroned it’ — Jean-Baptiste Say and then Wilfredo Pareto. The art of politics, as roughly stated by Leo Strauss, is reduced to an understanding of the laws of nature: the political question ‘What?’ of the common good becomes embedded in the question ‘How?’ of the modern classical philosophy, casting aside the political question.

**Dealing with innovation, uncertainty and disruption**

Neoschumpeterian scholars, opposed to the neoclassical economy mainstream, put emphasis on the nature of technology not considered as a manna from heaven but as a global and social transformation process:
Thus, in broader terms, technological change stems from within the economic and social system and is not merely an adjustment to transformations brought about by causes outside that system. Societies have, in other words, a say in the shape technology is likely to take. Hence the importance of technology assessment for the policy choice which need to be made. (Freeman and Soete, 1997: 429)

The coming of a third industrial revolution makes the lessons of the classical political philosophy more relevant today and demonstrates the need to consider the Socratic question of the good society: How will a new technology serve, or not serve, the common good and how will it foster, through the Schumpeterian destructive creation process, the corruption of the social institutions and civic life?

The classics knew there was a relation between political or social change and technological change. Technical progress has endangered the socio-political equilibrium of society. That is the reason why it demanded a strict moral and political supervision of inventions: ‘the good and the wise city will determine which inventions are to be made use of and which are to be suppressed’ (Strauss, 1978: 198).

Machiavelli’s intent may be considered as that of combining classical values with the development conditions of the modern — changing and uncertain — world, building the basics for an evolutionary view of the development process. Through the concept of fortuna,
corruption is still an irreversible, one-way process, part of the mutability and entropy of sublunary things; personality and polity may be kept in equilibrium or may decay, and there is no third possibility. (Pocock, 2003: 211)

On the opposite side, civic value may produce neguentropy and virtù has a systemic character: the virtù of the people is more than the sum of individual virtù and the virtù of every individual depends on the virtù of each individual and of the whole. A republic is more able to produce virtù than a monarchy since there are more interactions between citizens thanks to civic and military activities. To put it in Schumpeterian terms, fortuna may be represented as a destructive process while virtù is a creative process, the confrontation of both resulting in the creative destruction process which is the Machiavellian moment.

As Reinert (2007: 73) reminds us, these interactions between citizens are also interactions between economic activities that create synergies, described, as early as in the middle of the trecento by the Florentine scholar and statesman Brunetto Latini (1220–94), as il ben commune. Wealth creation appears to be a social and collective process, while putting emphasis on the role of the individual. The common good and the role of the educated individual who became a citizen are the two pillars of the Renaissance. Three hundred years after Latini, Machiavelli explains that the corruption process begins when the individual loses his autonomy and is no longer able to act as an active citizen and that the power of the many becomes the power of the few.

To sum up, Machiavelli appears to be a political thinker in an evolutionary world where, as Alexandre Koyré (1988) puts it, humankind has graduated ‘from being a spectator into being an owner and master of nature’. He is contemporaneous with Leonardo da Vinci who appears to be the first thinker of innovation through his concept of disegno that allows man to conceive artefacts that go beyond the reproduction of the physical universe our mind can comprehend but that are the projection of

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The Machiavellian moments are not permanent and societies rise and decline according to their ability to resist the assault of fortuna.

Figure 1

Innovazione, rinnovazione

Machiavellian moment

Virtù

Creative construction

Corruptio

Destructive destruction

his imagination. This capacity — wonder — is characteristic of the Renaissance world and we find it at the beginning of Antonio Serra’s Breve Trattato (1613) as ‘the origin of philosophy and of the truth that we come to know through it’. Machiavelli is a thinker in a political world where the Prince may design the future of the nation and change its destiny (Gaille-Nikodimov and Ménissier, 2006).

Institutions as an evolutionary process

As a consequence, institutions — that define the role and the possibility of the common weal — need to evolve because the ethos of the citizens tends to become corrupt faced with fortuna. Machiavelli introduces the distinction between innovazione, which is the adaptive process of institutions, and rinnovazione when institutions have become corrupt (Gaille-Nikodimov and Ménissier, 2006: 274).

Similarities with this approach may be found in the later works of Douglass North (2005), who abandoned his initial neoclassical stance to define institutions as rules of the game that allow development and growth. North — reviving the tradition of institutional economics founded by Veblen and Commons — insists on the difference between formal institutions — that may be changed overnight — and informal institutions that are beliefs, habits, and behavior that we may roughly encapsulate in civic values. In scholastic philosophy, the form of the institution determines the content. Machiavelli reversed the relation between formal institutions and the content, which is the city, its citizens and their ethos — in other words, informal institutions. Machiavelli observes an Aristotelian thesis according to which there are multiple forms of institutional excellence depending on the nature of the city. As North says in contemporary terms, it is a waste of energy trying to define perfect formal institutions if they do not rely on informal institutions that are beliefs, habits and knowledge, what David Landes (2000) brings together under the concept of culture or Aoki
North defines institutional dynamics when confronted with a non-ergodic world. In the neoclassical positivist hypothesis, the world is ergodic and wholly predictable by a scientific approach. In a non-ergodic world, the key competency becomes adaptive learning that is building new informal institutions encapsulating new knowledge and beliefs. It is worth pointing out the convergence between contemporaneous and classical concepts of institutional dynamics: non-ergodicity and fortuna, institutional entropy and corruptio, and the need for collective institutional adaptive learning as an improvement of Machiavellian virtù.

The Machiavellian moment in public management

Neoclassical economy considers technology as an exogenous agent that imposes its burden on workers and society based on the positivist stance that laws of nature exist that must be obeyed by policy-makers, as Jean-Baptiste Say (1803) said. In the case of the former socialist economies, technology was also an exogenous agent obeying laws of history and doomed to give birth to a new world. In both cases, the endogenous social process of change is neglected, resulting in the failure of the latter and the inefficiency in the former. As Freeman and Soete (1997: 429) put it: ‘Technological disenfranchisement accompanied political disenfranchisement.’ Entering the third industrial revolution calls for more political debate, more civic responsibility for issues such as pollution, social transformation, risk-taking, technological assessment as an institution aimed at providing social integration and sustainable development, and the use of technology.

New public management, the Washington consensus, the Brussels consensus, OECD ‘good governance’ principles, aim to define ‘one size fits all’ principles to managing the state, neglecting its political and institutional role and putting emphasis mainly on its organizational efficiency (Drechsler, 2005b; Ha-Joon Chang, 2007; Reinert, 2007; Rochet, 2007). Intending to oppose these two targets — pursuing the common good and being efficient in ruling the state — would lead us into the trap of the philosopher king, that is the philosopher without any influence on the course of history, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, relying only on managerial techniques as NPM has intended. This is precisely what Machiavelli wanted to avoid when he wrote The Prince: it is possible to use efficient means to effectively serve the common good.

Basically, NPM, by its reduction of politics to management, reflects the mainstream modern conception, which is fascinated by the mighty power of technology that left out politics. It reflects the modern political philosophy that claims to have resolved the theological political problem through a perfect understanding of nature by human reason. This positivist approach claims to have discovered the laws of nature. Thus, the power of man is not that of his mind but of some natural order, whether it be the ‘laws of History’, ‘the Market’ or economic globalization as a promised land. This view...
Creating Machiavellian momentum
Institutional dynamics and institutional resilience
Institutional growth

Institutions

Formal

Informal

The Prince as a founding father
Initial non-virtuous habits
virtuous habits

Republic

Security and reign of the common good

Rule of law

Civic virtue

Decision-making system

A priori knowledge

Ergodioty

N, fortuna

Public debate, tumult

Risk-taking decision-making process

Innovating decision

Virtù = Phronesis, taking circumstances into account

Disorders, entropy, non-ethic action, inability to face with uncertainty

Figure 2 The Machiavellian moment in public management
is the negation of the legacy of the Renaissance, which freed the human mind and its creativity from any predetermined cosmic order.

Leading scholars advocate, with the death of NPM and its making a bête noire of the Weberian state, a rebirth of the political state and the definition of a neo-Weberian conception (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). The old Weberian conception relied on the separation of managerial techniques and values that led to strong bureaucratic structures. With the emergence of an information society, public bodies may have feedback about the outcomes of their actions, the basics of the Weberian public management may be upgraded, and a link between the day-to-day public management and ethical questions may be built.

The Machiavellian moment in public management today may be represented as a three-layered system (Figure 2):

1 The first layer is the very moment of institutional growth, when the founding father builds the bases of the society. The founder (‘the Prince’ in Machiavellian terms) acts in two ways: creating formal institutions that create an incentive to behave according to the common good, but most of all creating virtuous habits among men looking for security and prosperity that can be achieved only by their union and cooperation. We saw that organizing civic and political life involving all citizens is a condition for creating synergy between economic activities: it is a common good since it must be shared in order to be enjoyed. Men, initially neither bad nor good, become a people of citizens. The problem here is for the prince to manage the transition toward the republic with the risk of becoming a tyrant. One hundred and fifty years after Machiavelli, the statesman Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff (1626–96) took inspiration from the Dutch cities to define an institutional policy that would allow Germany to industrialize. He originated a tradition whereby the Prince was entitled to govern since he had the task of modernizing the country, but while doing so he was creating the conditions whereby the Prince — and the feudal institutions — would become obsolete: ‘A successful Principality carried with it the seeds of its own destruction and the birth of democracy’ (Reinert, 2007: 225).

2 The second layer deals with institutional dynamics and institutional resilience. Formal institutions are set up and the society lives under the rule of law. Formal institutions co-evolve with informal institutions that are civic values, based on patriotism and the strategic will to be a nation. This equilibrium is the Machiavellian momentum when a republic can exist but is always faced with the threat of fortuna that may bring corruption or reinforce civic virtues according to the shared virtù of the prince and the people (Figure 1). The more a society opens and develops, the more it is exposed to fortuna. The debate was at the center of the foundation of the United States, as Pocock illustrates, through the debate between Alexander Hamilton and Jefferson. Hamilton was the thinker and actor of the American federal state with strong power, strong institutions (national bank, national debt) and industrial policy built through state intervention and protectionism, in the same way as England did for her own expansion. Jefferson was committed as a classical republican to the ideal of virtue but saw its preservation in an agrarian society rather than in commercial
expansion since he saw continuity between commercial activity and *fortuna*. On one side, Jefferson represented the ideal of a stable agrarian society that could absorb commerce, and, on the other side, Hamilton represented an expanding commercial society with the risk of becoming an empire with a corrupt society, to the point of falling under the power of an ‘immense military-industrial complex’ described, 150 years later, by Eisenhower in his farewell address (Pocock, 2003: 543). This debate is permanent in expanding societies, especially when they experience technological paradigm shifts, as described by Freeman and Louça (2001) and Carlota Perez (2002), that destroy the prevailing social consensus around which the common good is built.

The third layer is the decision-making system. Public policy decisions are made according to the knowledge available to decision-makers, what Joel Mokyr (2002) calls ‘useful knowledge’, that is to say both theoretical and empirical knowledge including the prevailing system of beliefs. The decision to be made comes up against a situation where the behavioral system is either ergodic or non-ergodic. The ergodic hypothesis has been introduced into public decision-making by Douglass North (2005) and Jacques Sapir (2005). We may roughly say that in an ergodic system deterministic methods (causal trees, statistics, etc.) may produce a good decision. That is mainly the case when we are within the same techno-economic paradigm, as defined by Chris Freeman and Carlota Perez. But, in the case of a paradigm shift, the previous knowledge base may not be appropriate since the behavior of the system is no longer predictable.

Understanding the behavior of a non-ergodic system means acceding to underlying principles that may be part of a wider set of systems whose behavior is ergodic. Institutional systems are the rules of the game that may reduce uncertainty when the system faces up to problems and situations already known. North’s central thesis (2005: 167) is that evolutionary processes are non-ergodic and that the ability to deal with novelty is critical in building effective institutions.

*Making good decisions in an uncertain world*

Thus, the decision-making system may face up to three situations:

First of all, the evolution of knowledge faced with the opposition of the incumbent system of shared beliefs and of the vested interests of the few that are in charge. This may lead to what Reinert calls a ‘panglossian’ decision,¹⁸ that is to say a kind of autistic behavior that rejects reality to maintain the prevalence of an obsolete — if it were once true — theory.

The other two situations depend on the degree of uncertainty and on whether the system has ergodic behavior or not. We may identify with North five degrees of uncertainty (North, 2005: 17), among which the first three today need incremental adjustment that corresponds with Machiavellian *innovazione*: improving the treatment of information with the prevailing stock of knowledge may reduce uncertainty. At a higher level of uncertainty, there is a need to increase the stock of useful knowledge within the same institutional pattern. At an even higher level, the institutional pattern must be changed. This decision-process under uncertainty excludes ‘one size
fits all’ decisions and implies that they are made according to circumstances and not from a prioris,¹⁹ and call for the practical wit of the leader, the *phronesis.*²⁰

The third situation is the one where uncertainty is radical and that makes the existing stock of knowledge, routines, beliefs and administrative practices inappropriate to decision-making. It is the case of Machiavellian *rinnovazione* when, if the basic beliefs of the institutional systems are not revised, they will lose their virtue and will be unable to resist attacks from *fortuna.* This process calls for public debates (that Machiavelli called ‘tumult’), direct democracy, risk-taking and innovative decisions. An ethical decision is always at risk. Spinoza has introduced the distinction between morality, which defines what is right or evil as a common rule admitted within a society, while ethics deals with what is good or bad according to a precise situation. Such a distinction is also found in Kant’s categorical imperative (‘What am I supposed to do according to imperative rules?’) and hypothetical imperative (‘What should I do to achieve a legitimate goal’). Ethics call for political wisdom and practical wit.

Either the process is successfully carried out and reinforces the virtuous habits among citizens, or it falls into disorder or non-ethical actions that increase the global entropy and make the system unable to face uncertainty. This will reinforce the corruption and endanger the republic. In Northian contemporaneous terms, the greater the failure in revising the basic beliefs of the institutions, the greater the risks of falling into irrational beliefs that may lead to totalitarianism, or at least to decline (e.g. deep ecology, ‘de-growth’ fascination, culture of narcissism,²¹ etc).

**Virtue, *fortuna* and Machiavellian principles in action: defining the right infrastructure to cross the Alps**²²

A very contemporary example of Machiavellian principles in action is provided by the decision-making process involved in building the railway infrastructure across the Alps, which involves France, Switzerland and Italy.

These infrastructure projects are large complex engineering projects such as those defined by Miller and Lessard (2000): they are unique, not reproducible, prototypes, and they have a long-term impact with many political, economic and social outcomes. They are long-term projects (at least five years for planning, five years for feasibility studies, and finally, five years for construction, but the full project from political decision to technical completion may last up to 50 years) that need a commitment over several decades. The state acts as an architect and is, of course, the main actor in the public decision-making through the publicly owned networks (whether they are operated by private operators or not). How can we check if the decision has been made according to the common weal?

Three decisional layers contribute to making the decision:

1. The **institutional layer**, at the state level, defines the broad strategic orientations, according to a plan that may last for 20 years (France) or 30 years (Switzerland).

2. The **organizational layer**, that is the project manager and the public operator who are in charge of evaluating the technical-economic aspects on the basis of indicators such as the net present value.
3 The citizens and all other stake holders who will evaluate the social outcomes. This group includes many public actors and will open debates, with strong civic activities. Catastrophes such as that of the Tunnel du Mont Blanc have resulted in the constitution of opponents to such projects, which are suspected of being short-sighted and of neglecting security and environmental issues for the profit of the main operator.

Engineers are not trained to make decisions in such a turbulent environment: they are trained to find the ‘one best way’ according to technical and financial parameters and they consider other kind of criteria as ‘irrational’. On the other side, participants in the public debates are mainly opponents and activists that are not legitimated to represent the many. Elected officials and local notables see public debates as an incrimination of their legitimacy to represent the people in a context of representative democracy and may want to reduce them to one-way ‘communication’ that does not give place to debate.

In the three countries, attitudes toward direct democracy are very different: in Switzerland, it is the base of civic life. In France, the state has a long-standing tradition of being an architect (France’s industrialization during the ‘trente glorieuses’, the nuclear power plants, the TGV . . .) and is now aware of the importance of public debate as a means of legitimating projects, avoiding contestation and, when projects are highly complex, a means of making other options appear. But know-how is quite new and needs to be improved. In Italy, the state is weak and the country experiences tumults that are not those Machiavelli was thinking of to sustain a republic.23

On the technological side, the railway is quite neutral regarding the transportation of merchandise and the risk of technological obsolescence is quite low: so the final trade-off will be made through assessment of the civic issues of the project.

Two projects of this kind are under way: the Swiss AlpTransit project which aims to build a global architecture of railway transportation within Switzerland, interconnected with its neighboring countries networks, and the Lyon Turin liaison between Lyon and Turin.

In the Swiss project, two main issues are involved in the debate. Every stakeholder has to pay for the project: the local community when they ask for special arrangements, the users, and the residents (regarding negative or positive externalities). The toughest issue is undoubtedly changing the business model of transportation since transportation by road is cheaper than transportation by train: the project has to create incentives for inter-modal transfers, putting merchandise on trains rather than trucks.

Switzerland is a special case since it is both the fatherland of direct democracy and it is situated at the crossroads of the rail and truck traffic crossing the Alps. Based on the experience of the St Gothard tunnel, paid for by Germany and Italy on the basis of a treaty, the Swiss decided to maintain their sovereignty over the traffic by paying for the tunnel themselves and by submitting any international treaty to a referendum. The stake for Switzerland is to avoid the 40 tonne trucks crossing the country, and converting them into inter-modal freight transport by containers, thus avoiding transportation by trucks. Planning this project required having a global European view of the network with a strategic objective to make it possible to cross the Alps in 10 hours. The global project, AlpTransit, was adopted by referendum in 1992, after a
tough campaign from the truckers’ lobby. One of the first main achievements of this project is the Lötschberg tunnel (2007) that will allow the transfer of 180,000 trucks (out of over 1.2 million per year) from road to rail.

By so doing, the Swiss have decided to:

- pay for and finance the project so as to master national independence and to keep control over the traffic problem;
- design a global national network interconnected with other European networks. On the national side, they rejected the TGV solution — taking into account the size of the country — preferring a ‘national tube’ solution that makes every one able to catch an intercity train without needing to check the time schedule (330 trains a day between Lausanne and Geneva). On the global side, they decided to finance the investments abroad so as to be connected with the European high-speed network — one example being the extension of the TGV from Macon (France) to Geneva.

Public debate, direct democracy, and global architectural projects led to many innovations at the local level such as the elimination of anti-noise walls, innovation in railroad material and an improvement in local connections for people. In comparison, the new French TGV between Paris and Strasbourg lacked such a global scenario and, although the line resulted in a better connection between Paris and Strasbourg, local connections were of a lower quality since all the effort had been concentrated on the TGV.

On the contrary, on the Italian side, the Lyon Turin project was not discussed and resulted in riots with 50,000 anti-project demonstrators on Turin’s streets, and a rebellion movement in the entire valley of Val di Suza. The former minister in charge (Lunardi) was an engineer with no experience of dialogue in the conception of large projects and his son owned a tunnel-digging company. Even the priests preached against the project in the churches! This conflict of interests between the private and the public good is the perfect illustration of Machiavellian corruptio. The Val di Suza movement appears to be a typically ‘not in my backyard’ movement, that is the result of the impossibility, through properly conduct public debate, to reconcile the local common good of its inhabitants with the global common good of the many at the country level as a whole.

The Italian government had to put the project back on track by setting up a discussion process with its opponents, which took place every week from the end of 2005, and examined four options (passengers and freight traffic assessment, route and environmental issues) and delegated the debate monitoring to an independent mediator used to dealing with such collective processes. The opponents’ point of view was henceforth published — something still unthinkable in the French process that is young and still considered as a threat to representative democracy and confined to secondary points, if not a pure ‘window dressing’ device. Although the project did not provoke riots in France, feedback about what happened in Italy — which resulted in at least a two-year delay — resulted in the project being re-examined by the French planning authorities so as to integrate the issues raised by the Italian debate into the project.
Reviewing how these debates are carried out in Switzerland, France and Italy in managing technical projects — which are basically alike — reveals the deadlocks of the technocratic top-down approach and the reign of the so-called experts unable to face up to *fortuna* assaults and the need to invigorate Machiavelli republican principles of empowering and educating people to maintain and expand the republican *vivere politico* to make good and legitimate decisions in complex project issues.

**Upgrading the research program in public management?**

Machiavelli was the first political philosopher to advocate that there is no stable society without debates and conflicts that act as a means to invigorate institutions in an open world, where societies are changing while entering an era of increasing returns that introduces uncertainty.

He understood that, confronted with an uncertain world, institutional innovation is a critical but risky task. Either the Prince does not understand the need for innovation and loses his ability to foreshadow it in a changing world, or he puts himself at risk since he will alienate vested interests without gaining immediate support from those who will benefit from these innovations. Thus, the Prince must not immediately reveal his intentions but act with ruse. Civic virtue, the *vivere politico*, is the key point to fostering institutional evolution. In our case study, we can see how far the non-respect of the public debate process has introduced non-virtuous habits that have resulted in non-virtuous ‘tumults’ that have led to the disruption of the project and its ineffectiveness. Machiavelli was preoccupied by both effectiveness and efficiency but put the former first and the latter second. Effectiveness was the republic and the rule of *virtù* where citizens interacted to sustain and improve civic values. Efficiency was considering the real man — including his selfishness and his vices — and real world problem-solving. Machiavelli’s innovation was looking for pragmatic means — including ‘honourably evil’, that was the reason why he was misunderstood — to develop the common good.

This legacy has been blurred with the liberal tradition of Hobbes and Locke distrusting the ability of men to deliberate collectively on the common good issues, putting emphasis mainly on private good and making the common good the simple sum of it and, as a consequence, boiling down the role of the state into one of coercion (Skinner, 1996, 2008).

Public management has been, up to now, mainly concerned with ‘efficiency’ in organizations that became the Holy Grail of all public administrators in the Anglo-Saxon world, as clearly shown by Fred Thompson in his thorough review of the political economy of public administration (2006). The first age was the Weberian paradigm, based on the separation between facts and values, which was the transposition in the administrative world of the search for economies of scale that characterized the production mode of the second industrial revolution. Then it had to face the decreasing efficiency of vertically integrated organizations with the coming of the third industrial revolution. As a consequence, in the context of the 1980s and the offensive against the welfare state, neoclassical economics became the compulsory path to pursuing the Holy Grail of efficiency. Many scholars have abundantly described what is wrong with neoclassical economics and the ways in which it is
inappropriate to deal with the real world, being a ‘blackboard economy’. Public choice theories that underlie the new trend in public administration want to build perfect models but they remain subject to ‘moral hazards’. To put it bluntly: have public choice theories — and others — achieved other results than those of modelling, with huge mathematical scaffoldings, what Machiavelli analyzed as being the effects of corruptio, that is the way private interests capture the state in the absence of virtù?

As Thompson said, ‘Economic logic often recognizes no good but efficiency, no evil but inefficiency’ (2006: 4). It is nowadays crystal clear that the managerial stance tells us how to do things right but not how to do the right things and that we also have to be preoccupied, principally, by effectiveness and appropriateness.

Managerial techniques are, of course, of critical importance. The last of the classical economists, John Stuart Mill, was not particularly enthusiastic about the new market-oriented stance as a means of fostering institutional evolution. It is beyond any doubt that the first industrial revolution in England was the fruit of a successful mercantilist policy based on an active role of the state (fiscal policy, investments in the Navy, industrial policy), as convincingly demonstrated by economic historians such as Patrick O’Brien (1998), but this resulted, at the end of the 18th century, in bureaucracy in the state as an organization. As Schumpeter (1986) put it in his History of Economic Analysis (1983, II: 234–5) no serious administrator would have pretended that, regarding the state of the British administration, overwhelmed with sinecures, any intent to regulate the economy through state intervention would have resulted in nothing but failure. That is the reason why Mill gave up dealing with the reform of the state and was resigned to accepting the mainstream laissez-faire. But, as Schumpeter points out, Mill refused to transform a judgement into a recommendation: these difficulties were insuperable at that time but did not legitimate anti-state monomania.

Modern techniques of management, especially information systems, make it possible to design flexible and adaptive structures and to have statistical information about the outputs and outcomes so as to give feedback to the public actor about what he is really achieving, allowing better resource allocation, de-bureaucratization and empowerment of civil servants though double loop learning (as defined by Argyris and Schön, 1978). By subjecting organizations to monitoring, managerial techniques allow us to identify the political trade-offs that are necessary (Rochet, 2007).

This is precisely where NPM missed the point. In making public administration, where implemented, a ‘liberal bureaucracy’, according to the definition coined by David Giauque, it focused mainly on outputs, financial incentives, and decentralization, and considered information technology as an exogenous manna from heaven and not as a means to endogenously transform bureaucracies (Rochet, 2007). Thompson points out the failure of public management to carry out this evolution:

the logic of horizontal integration isn’t very well developed or understood, in part because students of management haven’t fully appreciated the need to rethink the problem of coordinating activities when information costs are low or of organizing to create value via parallel process. Organizational economists have been especially resistant to rethinking received doctrines. (2006: 44)
Making public administration enter the digital era, on the contrary, requires entering a ‘digitalization era governance’ focusing on themes such as reintegration, needs-based systems, engineering and digital changes (Dunleavy et al., 2005). This is a typically Machiavellian perspective where the government is freed from any deterministic conception and acts as an architect, considering first the ends of the public action, the common good, effectiveness through organizational efficiency (and not the contrary) and the improvement of civic virtù within the sphere of public administration through empowerment of civil servants and by making public administration a catalyst of private initiatives toward a global strategy.

As a conclusion, we should ask the question: How can we introduce ethics and civic values, the notion of common good, into public management as an academic discipline? Imre Lakatos (1980) has developed the concept of ‘research programmes’ based on a core hypothesis that is initially a belief, surrounded by a belt of protective hypotheses that are doomed to be ‘falsified’, in a Popperian sense. He qualified a research program that was no longer able to be predictive and to produce new knowledge as ‘degenerating’. The growing interest in ethics in public management research sheds light on the ‘degenerating’ character of the research program based on managerialism. Fred Thompson emphasizes the drift of public management toward neoclassical economics and its inability to deal with the real world of day-to-day problems of public administration. As Reinert (2000) said, neoclassical economics has degenerated into ‘working upon itself’ — Francis Bacon said the same about late scholasticism — and has come full circle from scholasticism to mathematical scholasticism and has lost its prescriptive capacity.

If we are able to disentangle managerial and organizational issues (doing things right) from political ones (doing the right things), managerial technologies revert to the basic ends of public action such those identified by the humanists of the Renaissance — among them Machiavelli, who is the most telling and the most misunderstood — the common weal, the civic virtue and the permanent need for institutional evolution.

Consequently, we should formulate our research program in public management around a core hypothesis: ‘Without political philosophy, public management is blind, political philosophy without public management is powerless.’ This program should aim to deal with questions such as ‘What is a good public decision?’, ‘What are the new strategic capabilities required among public managers to deal with this integration of civic values into public management?’ and ‘How can we foster institutional evolution when confronted by disruptive changes in the environment?’ As a result, public management would be a permanent updating process so as to act as the visible hand that would deal with practical problem-solving in public affairs, restoring the power of politics and the love of the common good as the very condition of existence of ‘such a thing as society’.

Notes

1 Virtù is not translatable since it is composed of vir (strength) and virtus (civic virtue). Machiavelli defines virtù as the superset of personal characteristics that a ruler must possess in order to maintain his rule as long as possible and achieve greatness in the process. The command of
fortune, possession of courage, and commitment to the common good are all determining factors of a prince’s virtù when facing fortuna that he describes as a woman, a force that a worthy prince can court, subdue, and control almost indefinitely.

2. . . Besides giving its share to popular control, these official were designed for the protection of Roman liberty (Discourses 1.4.1: 204).

3 I do not embark in this article on the discussion about whether Machiavelli is a professor of evil or not. He advocates the use of bad means to preserve the state, having in mind preserving institutions that are those of the common good, or to refund it when corrupted. Machiavelli considered — taking as an example Piero Soderini who was the last (and weak) ruler (gonfalonier) of the Florentine republic who didn’t dare use ‘bas means’ to preserve the common good and led the republic to its demise — that a prince must not hesitate to use ‘honorably evil’ means if the republic must be saved and republican institutions (re)founded, even if doing so, the prince pursue its own glory. Leo Strauss, who presented Machiavelli as the first to abandon classical philosophy and as a ‘teacher of evil’, in his Thoughts on Machiavelli, acknowledges the continuity of his thought with the classical philosophy, but laments the abandonment of a super-human conception of how man must live. His philosophy builds ‘low but solid’ with the ‘Beast Man as opposed to the God Man’ (1958: 296) as symbol. Strauss considers that, in spite of what makes Machiavelli a man of the Renaissance, his conception of man makes him modern. I do not share this interpretation, considering that Machiavelli’s intent was to reconcile classical political philosophy with the discovery of the power of science and technology to transform the natural state. I agree with Pocock’s comment on Isaiah Berlin’s concept of liberty that the Machiavellian moment is the turning point between the conception of positive liberty — which is the republican one — and of negative liberty — which is the liberal one — but that the real gap in the edification of the modern natural law and the classic natural law is between Machiavelli and Hobbes who is, after Giovanni Botero (1589) as a founding father, the real philosopher of the raison d'état (Pocock, 2003). I am inclined to follow Claude Lefort’s interpretation that, in a political body, the people of the dispossessed are a better guardian of justice and of the idea of the Good society than the philosophers (as in Plato’s view) since they constantly protest or revolt against the reigning order. This debate is a matter of how to deal with the political-theological problem that is beyond the scope of this article (Labelle, 2006).

4 Cassirer oversaw Leo Strauss’ thesis.

5 Maurizio Viroli (2000) makes the point particularly clear in his biography of Machiavelli: ‘Machiavelli never taught that the end justifies the means or that a statesman is allowed to do what is forbidden to others, . . . he taught, rather, that if someone is determined to achieve a great purpose — free a people, found a state, enforce the law and create peace where anarchy and despotism reign — then he must not fear being thought cruel or stingy but must simply do what is necessary in order to achieve the goal.’

6 ‘The vivere politico is a specific form of political organization that preduces tyranny and despotnic rule and is incompatible with the state of someone: if a citizen or a party succeeds in dominating the laws and the magistrates, one can no longer speak of a republic’ (Viroli, 1992).

7 Machiavelli began to write his works after 1512, when he had to leave his position after the return of the Medicis. In a letter to his friend Vettori (09.04.1513), he explains that, thanks to the fortuna, the only matter he mastered was the art of the state (Arte dello stato) and he didn’t want to discuss the good, justice and the human condition in abstracto, but produce a more practical study of the relationships between the citizens and the state, and between states.

8 ‘Discours d'état sur les moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix un Royaume ou autre principauté . . . Contre Nicolas Machiavel, florentin’ (1576) by Innocent Gentillet. Gentillet’s book had a lot of reprints by the end of the 17th century, giving birth to the pejorative terms of ‘Machiavellianism’ and ‘Machiavellian’.

9 Giovanni Botero (1589), Della ragione di stato. It is worth making note of the fact that the expression ragione di stato never appears in the works of Machiavelli. Botero develops a conception of the state based entirely on a notion of power that Botero explicitly opposes to Bodin’s concept of sovereignty (1576) and that kept spreading throughout Europe — Botero
proposes a political model linking a ‘Machiavellian’ analysis of power struggles with a study of the conditions governing the economic development of states. As Senellart (1989) put it, Botero is actually ‘Machiavellian’ in Gentillet’s meaning of the term, but clearly anti-Machiavellian since Machiavelli considers personal interest as a source of conflict. Botero had to reconcile two contradictory requirements: the need of a strong State but not independent from the power of the Church. Thus, the only reliable strength is that of industry, and Botero appears to be a forerunner of liberal thinking, opposing the mercantilism advocated by Bodin. Botero gives birth to an anti-Machiavellian and anti-sovereign reason of state (Descendre, 2003).

10 ‘On a commencé à se guérir du machiavélisme . . . et il est heureux que pendant que leurs passions leur inspirent la pensée d’être méchants, ils ont pourtant intérêt à ne pas l’être’ (Montesquieu, L’Esprit des Lois, XXI, 20).

11 ‘La manière dont les choses sont et dont les choses arrivent, constitue ce qu’on appelle la nature des choses; et l’observation exacte de la nature des choses est l’unique fondement de toute vérité. . . . L’économie politique . . . est établie sur des fondements inébranlables, du moment que les principes qui lui servent de base sont des déductions rigoureuses de faits généraux incontestables’ (Jean-Baptiste Say, Traité d’économie politique, 1803).

12 Machiavelli denied the efficiency of mercenaries’ troops — an infatuation we may find all through his works — as Italian cities were used to, and pleaded in favor of an army of citizens as being the only ‘clean arms’ possible.

13 ‘The disegno is of such excellence that it does not only show the works of nature, but that it produces forms infinitely more varied. It outshines nature because of the limited character of its elementary forms while works required by the eye of man are unlimited’ (Leonardo da Vinci, quoted by Jean-Louis le Moigne, 2007). Disegno gave birth to the English word ‘design’.

14 ‘ . . . Wonder has always been a source of great good. For it is wonder that stimulates the desire for knowledge that is innate in all people; it is wonder that lifts from the mind the veil of which ignorance covers; it is wonder that prompts the mind to investigate causes and learn how effects proceed from them. This kind of knowledge was the origin of philosophy, and the truth that we come to know through it.’ ‘Wonder’ is part of the rediscovering of classics since it appears in Plato’s Theætetus about the art of knowledge.

15 The way formal and informal institutions interact has also been pointed out by Nietzsche: opinions change first and formal institutions may follow with inertia: ‘The overthrow of institutions does not follow immediately upon the overthrow of opinions, instead the new opinions live for a long time in the desolate and strangely unfamiliar house of their predecessors and even preserve it themselves, since they need some sort of shelter’ (quoted in Reinhert, 2007: 127).

16 ‘(1) A system is ergodic when a sequence or sizable sample is equally representative of the whole (as in regard to a statistical parameter); (2) involving or relating to the probability that any state will recur, especially having zero probability that any state will never recur’ (Webster’s Dictionary).

A collection of systems forms an ergodic ensemble if the modes of behavior found in any one system from time to time resemble its behavior at other temporal periods and if the behavior of any other system when chosen at random also is like the one system. We do not require identical performance, only quite similar time averages and number averages. In an ergodic population, any single individual is representative of the entire population. The salient characteristics of this individual are essentially identical with any other member of the group’ (Principia Cybernetica Web).

17 The theological political problem is the tension between the revealed Law and the positive law designed by human reason. For Leo Strauss, it may be typified by the tension between Athens (human law) and Jerusalem (revealed Law). This tension raises permanently the ontological question of the ends of political action and is irresolvable. For a thorough presentation, see Tanguay (2003).

18 Dr Pangloss is presented in Voltaire’s Candide as the man who has always the right explication of why the worst things happen with always the same conclusion: ‘all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds’, since he believed that what happens is the law of nature and that there
is no other choice possible. Panglossian attitudes are those of ideologues that reject reality and its complexity and want to apply one size fits all recipes to every situation.

19 Such a distinction between a priori and circumstances doctrine was central in Charles de Gaulle's political philosophy. He may be seen as an archetype of the Machiavellian leader in the 20th century.

20 Phronesis is the ability to think about how and why we should act in order to change things, and especially to change our lives for the better. Aristotle says that phronesis isn't simply a skill, however, as it involves not only the ability to decide how to achieve a certain end, but also the ability to reflect upon and determine the desired end which is never given but needs reflection and ethical choice. Phronesis may be translated as ‘prudence’ that is gained by experience: 'Whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics, and wise within these limits, prudent young people do not seem to be found. The reason is that prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it' (Nichomachian Ethics 1142 a).

21 I refer to the seminal eponymous book by Christopher Lasch (1988) that describes the abandonment by modern man of any kind of ideal.

22 This case study was set up during the first session of the ‘Cycle de la décision publique’ held at Ecole National d’Administration, Paris, June 2007. I thank Michel Beguelin, Conseiller aux Etats (Swiss Parliament) and Marie-Lyne Meaux (Responsable de la Mission des Alpes en charge de l'évaluation du transport français sur l'Arc alpi) for their contribution.

23 On the decay of the vivere politico in Italy, see the dialogue between Roberto Bobbio and Maurizio Viroli (2006).

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