
Original Article

Fortune and irony in international politics: Martin Wight and Machiavelli's legacy

Michele Chiaruzzi

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali, Università di Bologna, Strada Maggiore 45, Bologna 40125, Italy.

E-mail: michele.chiaruzzi@unibo.it

Abstract The idea that political action takes place in a volatile context, which constrains decisions and affects outcomes, is an essential aspect of Niccolò Machiavelli's political thought. In fact, historical forces such as fortune and irony play a central role in many of his works. He sees *fortuna* as the force that conditions political action and tends to thwart it. Machiavelli's attempt to describe the limits of freedom and the dilemmas imposed by these limits on political action has been echoed by Martin Wight in his essay 'Fortune's Banter'. By presenting a critical appraisal of political realism and a rejection of political determinism, this article tries to assess Machiavelli's legacy in Wight's thought. I aim to show how Machiavelli's ideas represent a cornerstone of Wight's analysis, which is based on classical notions such as irony, tragedy, necessity and, of course, fortune. Drawing on an in-depth analysis of Wight's so-far unpublished work, this article also examines some crucial aspects of the causal and moral complexity that surrounds political action and its analysis.

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Introduction

The importance of imponderable elements in human affairs has been discussed since the dawn of Western culture. An excerpt from the book of *Ecclesiastes* (9:11 KJ21) gives a clear example of this: 'Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all'. The peremptory closing – 'time and chance happen to them all' – is appropriate to describe the circumstances surrounding Martin Wight's unpublished paper



'Fortune's Banter', emerged from oblivion more than 50 years after it was written (see Chiaruzzi, 2016). The passage in the *Ecclesiastes* quoted above also reminds us of the fatal circumstances of Wight's life: he died when he was 58 for a chronic asthma that had afflicted him for many years. It was 1972 when the worst mockery of fate was accomplished and this man, arguably, 'the most admired of his generation' (Hill, 1985, p. 130) of British scholars of international relations, prematurely disappeared.

He had poured much of his knowledge into his papers, such as 'Fortune's Banter', pondered and then abandoned in the coldness of the archives without ever reaching publication, due to a 'perfectionism which seems to prevent me from being satisfied with anything' (quoted in Bull, 1977, p. 15). Unfinished works remain, which I think deserves to be presented and discussed. In this article, therefore, I will address and consider the genesis of the text, its structure and, as I am going to explain, momentous aims. I will explore what appears to me to be the central theme of Wight's essay: that is, the causal and moral complexity of politics and its relationship with the gnoseological nexus between theory and practice. In doing so, I wish to shed some light on Machiavelli's legacy in Wight's use of the concepts of 'fortune' and 'irony' in international politics. As I am going to explain, however, such a legacy should be understood on its own terms. For, 'fortune' and 'irony' should not be considered 'anachronistic concepts'. On the contrary, they belong, genealogically, to our modern political tradition that over time has redefined and rearranged them using ancient notions. Among these notions, the concept that carries the heaviest analytical burden – hence its great relevance for us – is that of 'perverse effects'.

Fortune and Irony as Perverse Effects

Thucydides (1921, I. 140. 1) once wrote: 'For it is just as possible for the course of events to move perversely as for the plans of men; and it is for that very reason that we commonly lay upon fortune the blame for whatever turns out contrary to our calculations'.¹ As far as I know, in political studies it is not fully acknowledged that the notion of 'perverse effects' was already present in the work of the Greek historian. This notion is connected directly with the concept of fortune, and indirectly with the idea of irony in history, which imply the irregularity and only partial understanding of political development. These notions evoke the recognition that, in politics, intentions are seldom fulfilled, and consequences usually elude reckoning.

Bearing this in mind, it shall be noted that Thucydides (1921, V, p. 102) was analytically aligned with the belief of the decisive superiority of the Athenians in terms of tangible power, of their empirical overwhelming force. Obviously, he could have not devalued the material elements by comparing them with intangible and elusive factors like fortune or irony. Along with the notion of 'human nature', those



concrete elements are precisely the foundation of his diagnostic and predictive effort to decipher politics (Canfora, 1991, pp. vii–xi). In contrast to the common view, which in Hellenistic times assigns to *tyche*, or fortune, an enormous potency, Thucydides excluded such intangible factors from political analysis (Canfora, 2014, p. 630).

However, nowadays it is accepted that every social action produces unexpected or unintended effects. This assumption has brought to the fore a specific definition of social sciences understood as ‘concerned with man’s actions and their aim is to explain the unintended or undersigned results of the actions of many men’ (Hayek, 1942, p. 276).² In 1936, a celebrated American scholar reminded that ‘in some one of its numerous forms, the problem of the unanticipated consequences of purposive action has been treated by virtually every substantial contributor to the long history of social thought’ (Merton, 1936, p. 894). Martin Wight’s essay ‘Fortune’s Banter’ deals precisely with this problem.

In other words, it deals with one of the timeless issues of social life; that is, the intricate relationship between political environment and individual freedom of action. This is the reason why the text begins with Machiavelli’s (1891) famous precept (p. 358): ‘I judge that it may be true that fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but that she still leaves the control of the other half (or a bit less) to us’. For Wight (2016, p. 79), Machiavelli’s idea of fortune represents the classic ‘attempt by a political scientist to describe the limits of freedom in political experience’. Also, and most importantly, Machiavelli’s notion of ‘fortune’ comprises both *tyche* and *ananke*, both *fortuna* and *necessitas*. As for the modern word ‘fortune’, Machiavelli’s concept refers to the association of fate with chance, of the determined with the accidental, the inevitable with the contingent, the predictable with the unforeseen. From this perspective, therefore, he should be considered a fundamental theorist of political action of its constraints and possibilities.

Wight’s work too concentrates on the process of political action and its concatenations, on the nature of the forces that influence it compelling, lessening or preventing the desired effect. The British scholar was confident that the concepts of ‘fortune’ and ‘irony’ describe the most ancient and fundamental experience in politics – the politician’s awareness that people and events are recalcitrant to purposeful guidance, that the results of political action never square with intention, that one can never dominate contingency and its infinitely changing material. What interested Wight was the incongruence between intention – that is, the aim associated to the action – context, and outcomes. This sort of incongruence has been investigated in various fields, through different methods and perspectives. The concept of ‘perverse effect’, for example, has acquired a relevant position in the context of theories of social change. For it indicates a situation where the interaction of individual behaviours leads to positive or negative outcomes that, however, no one wanted to achieve (Boudon, 1977, 1984). It also refers to another issue: the cause-effect relationship in the domain of politics. This is the focal point of Wight’s study,



which deals with the problem of political choice, the ‘hard decision’ through which the politician decides his/her own and other people’s destiny. Here, Machiavelli’s legacy speaks for itself. In a passage on ‘the useful word’ *brinkmanship*, for example, Wight (2016) emphasizes Machiavelli’s legacy and the relevance of this concept for international politics: ‘It is a vivid restatement of the Machiavellian philosophy of politics, combining the traditional ideas of fate, which leads along the verge of war; of chance, which must be mastered; of taking chances; of imposing the political will by strong action; of politics as the necessary art, as *virtù*’ (p. 99).

Wight’s Intent: Text, Context, Method

The title of this article – ‘Fortune and Irony in International Politics’ – resumes the one placed by Wight upon one of the latest draft versions of his ‘Fortune’s Banter’, a somehow ‘troubled’ and much-worn paper. Let me explain the rationale of this choice. Wight had dealt with irony in politics since the beginning of his studies, in his early to mid-30s. This is confirmed, among other things, by another paper, which was never released, entitled ‘Some Reflections on the Historical Antichrist’ (Wight, MSS/43).³ Like most of Wight’s important political writings, ‘Fortune’s Banter’ is a posthumous survival. However, it is not a first draft, and the author clearly made an effort to revise and refine the material. It is a 49 handwritten document with two distinct textual layers – the first, original typescript, and the second, corrective manuscript.

It was developed at different times, probably during a four-year period, between 1957 and 1961, and it is plausible that it was never revised. This conclusion can be drawn on the basis of Wight’s bibliographical and chronological references. However, a schematic undated note, written like a sketch, bears a title that later disappeared: ‘Necessity and Chance in International Relations’. This fact allows noticing an interesting aspect of the text: it is the sphere of international politics, even before than the domestic one, the initial field of reference of the author; and this should not be overlooked. Such a view does not contradict what Wight thought of Machiavelli’s political theory. According to Wight (2016), for the Florentine fortune was ‘the queen of international politics’ (p. 84).⁴

Those pages were then corroborated, modified and increased in number, until the final redaction. Among Wight’s papers, stored in the archives of the British Library of Political and Economics Science, there are various previous versions of the same text. The first one I got to know was written in Chicago, on 13 March 1957. Wight arrived in Chicago in October 1956 to teach Political Science. He spent there a period as visiting scholar on invitation and in replacement of Hans Morgenthau, with whom he shared esteem and friendship (cf. Morgenthau to Wight, 20 January, 30 January, 20 February 1956, Wight MSS/103; Wight to Morgenthau, undated draft, Wight MSS/103). This initial version, which seems prepared for his American lectures,



was entitled 'Fortune and Irony in International Politics'. Over time, the paper was changed but the title remained the same, at least until 17 May 1960. It was then that Wight went to Dublin invited by Desmond Williams, Professor of Modern History and also a member of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics (Hegarty to Wight, 28 April 1960, Wight MSS/56).⁵ Williams' letter to Wight is dated 11 March 1960 and its style – 'my dear Martin' – is a clear sign of the friendly correspondence between the two.

The news of Wight's presence in Ireland circulated on the most important Irish newspaper.⁶ On that occasion, he lectured a different version of the text at the inaugural meeting of the History Society at the University College, presenting it once again with the same title as mentioned above. He changed it in the last draft, which ended up being the final one. He changed the title of his work after a thoughtful reconsidering, and replaced the more explanatory 'Fortune and Irony in Politics' with a sophisticated variant, a title full of echoes of Machiavelli's work: 'Fortune's Banter'. However, while 'for Machiavelli *fortuna* was a destructive force, like an Italian river in spate' (Wight, 2016, p. 82), Wight's idea of 'fortune' is more benevolent, and yet not benign. After all, Wight (2016) notes (p. 82), 'Machiavelli on the whole resented what Fortuna had done in his country. Fortuna had affronted Machiavelli's patriotism, and been malignant to him in his personal career'. Nonetheless, fortune – in Wight's view – is just one among those historical forces that condition political action and tend to thwart it. Thus, the change is a relevant one because it does not merely reflect an exercise in style, but rather a substantive, methodological problem.

The 'Ironic Variable' and the Limits of Knowledge

In fact, by focusing on what is said to be 'banter', Wight selects, from his extensive sources and archival material, those actions and facts that have 'disappointed' the intentions or the expectations of political agents. Accordingly, it is obvious that the exclusions are as relevant as the inclusions, because they inevitably lead to a specific and subjective discussion on the role of the 'ironic variable' in politics and the limits of knowledge. As Wight (2016, p. 113) puts it:

Predictions can come true, if you allow for the ironic transformation of what is predicted as our own attitudes towards it change. Non-prediction can be right and wise, if you allow for the ironic ocean-drift bearing the non-predictor in the direction of that which he cannot or dare not predict. By the time that what was correctly predicted has arrived, we find that though extrinsically the same it is yet qualitatively different from what we expected, and that we ourselves are different from the us who first feared or hoped for it.



It is no coincidence that 'Fortune's Banter' begins with a discussion of Machiavelli's ideas, since '*fortuna* expresses the idea that the causal complexity of politics is so great that it eludes complete calculation: only probabilities can be calculated' (Wight, 2005, p. 22). In his work, Wight proceeds by picking concepts and examples from the whole course of history, not considering the chronological boundaries as a speculative limit, because to him the same notion recurs in the supreme dramatic moments of different historical periods. However, for the British thinker (Wight, 2016, p. 86), Machiavelli's thought obviously represents a cardinal turning point:

There are several reasons why Machiavelli did not reinstate the classical notion of Fate or Necessity along with Fortune. For one, he was not a systematic philosopher, and was content with a single word to cover all the inexplicable aspects of politics. For another, he was a passionate patriot in a country occupied and partitioned, and instinctively preferred language suggesting a future flexible and open to one inexorable and closed. For a third, the conception of Providence he overthrew was unitary, and it was a unitary conception with which he replaced it.

Across the ages, multiple observations and interpretations have been proposed on the multifaceted nature of the political process and its constraints on individuals. Rebuilding and isolating them by means of historiographical flexibility, Wight offers classifications, and highlights diversities and substantial homologies between very different cases. Using an analytical approach, he deals with a wide range of problems related to the development and outcomes of the interactions between individual actions and the structure that conditions the historical-political dynamic. The result is an analysis that concerns, *inter alia*, the question of the purpose and the possibility of causal explanation in politics; the question of the relationships between calculable and incalculable variables; the problem of predictable and imponderable factors. Most of all, Wight's analysis concerns the unintended effects of intentional actions and, implicitly, the impact of individual will and political strategies on future events.

This way of proceeding depends, of course, on Wight's main purpose. Such purpose shall be historically located and concretely understood. Indeed, it would be rather metaphysical to figure out what the author's purpose was without considering what he has historically represented (Canfora, 1972, p. 21). This intention emerges from Wight's own text, perhaps late but without hesitation:

Bury published *The Idea of Progress* in 1919, at the very end of the liberal period of European history whose religion progress had been. A corresponding book might be written, for our age, on the idea of the irony of history, which is the converse of the belief in progress. It appears, so to speak, as the minority report against the idealist, historicist and positivist orthodoxies of the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century has tended to replace them (Wight, 2016, p. 103).



As a matter of fact, Wight (1987, p. 224) was notably sceptical about a ‘new’ kind of historicism, as clearly stated during a seminar he held at the Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales of Geneva in 1960:

‘Historicism’ is a word that has changed its meaning since Meinecke wrote the history of *Historismus*. Then it had its original sense, of the doctrine that all values are historically conditioned, that reality itself is a historical process, and that history can teach nothing except philosophical acceptance of change. Now it has a new sense: the doctrine that history has a purpose and direction, that its movement is largely predictable, and that it can (under proper interpretation) teach everything we need to know about life and prescribe our duties. (Cf. Meinecke (1936))

We do know about Bury’s book – *The Idea of Progress*, which the author sarcastically dedicated to the optimists and, in particular, to the Abbot of Saint-Pierre, Condorcet, Comte and Spencer. They were all gathered under the motto *Tantane vos generis tenuit fiducia vestri?*, echoing the words that Neptune, disgusted after seeing the storm dispersing the entire fleet of Aeneas, directed to Euro and Zèfiro: ‘Has such great confidence of your race taken hold of you?’ (Virgil, 1885, § I, p. 132). On the contrary, we do not know whether the book to which Wight alludes was his own, the one he had never developed from ‘Fortune’s Banter’. In any case, the theoretical pivot around which his analytical and narrative axis revolves is located there: that is, in his critique of political determinism.

Politics and Indeterminism

Let’s be clear: Wight’s position is, first and foremost, opposite to a certain determinism, to the idea that the occurrence of social phenomena can be determined by applying variously constructed political schemes; and that such schemes are detectable by means of knowledge or, at least, following its constant progress. Wight’s work is therefore a critique of linear conceptions of development and decadence in political studies. He opposes these conceptions and specifically criticizes three ‘scientific’ assumptions or ‘paradigms’ that hold this idea in the field of politics: the mechanistic, the biologicist and the psychological one. He particularly criticizes those forms of historical determinism that descend from the belief according to which it is possible to decipher human affairs up to the point of identifying *ex ante* their outcome – in the form of prediction. Accordingly, Wight is also sceptical about forecasting in the realm of politics. He challenges first of all, but not only, those interpretations of social development as a progress leading to an ultimate human goal, variously identified according to different theories and ideologies. His critique stems from an analytical plan, heavy and sour, upon which he investigates the convulsive trajectories of irony in politics, although this



‘affront our belief in the rational control of our affairs and our consciousness of moral rectitude’ (Wight, 2016, p. 109).

Being alien to such a belief, he proceeds on his own way, taking off the ‘pseudo-rational plaster’,⁷ to use Pareto’s metaphor (Bobbio, 1990, p. 61). This is both a relevant and a practical concern because, as he writes (Wight, 2016, p. 87), ‘the spectator of politics, a person like the historian, analyzing the game without having to play it, sometimes believes that this is a false antithesis; that the appearance of contradiction ... arises from the limitations of our knowledge’. Nevertheless, this view of politics is just a false reflex: ‘What we experience as accident, the contingent, the unpredictable, we see in retrospect to be part of the unbroken web of cause and effect’ (Wight, 2016, p. 87). Wight attempts, therefore, to understand the presence of non-rational – if not of irrational or even inconceivable – factors in politics whose constant presence undoes the interlaced fabric of deterministic interpretations.

He expresses a radical doubt about the actual possibility to shape political events, examining the power of destabilizing and almost uncontrollable historical forces. Thus, Wight explores and deals with what Der Derian (2009, p. 200) regards as ‘some of the most powerful “variables” of IR like irony and contingency ... ambiguity and paradox’. Following Machiavelli’s lesson, he aims at emphasizing the impracticality of systematic human control on the political processes that punctuate history: ‘Irony in politics might be defined as the warping of the political intention by the historical context – the warping of the less-than-one-half of our action which we direct by the more-than-one-half of which fortune is arbiter’ (Wight, 2016, p. 106).

However, such a view on the implication of indeterminable causes and vicissitudes in human affairs is itself an ‘unstable achievement’. If we gather together Wight’s different perspectives on Machiavelli’s axiom (Machiavelli, 1891, p. 358) – ‘fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but ... she still leaves the control of the other half (or a bit less) to us’ – a pertinent doubt arises. For, we might juxtapose Wight’s own words to formulate some alternative questions about this last intention. Did Wight (2005, pp. 22–23) write his proposition to offer ‘a quaint quantitative estimate of the role of decision within the framework of necessity’? Did Wight (2016, p. 79) write it to advance ‘a naïve quantification’ that may be taken ‘as an attempt by a political scientist to describe the limits of freedom in political experience’? Alternatively, did he try to emulate an ‘attempt at experientially based philosophy of international politics’ (Wight, 1957)? Distinctions and a certain theoretical pluralism are genuine features of any writer and are certainly reflected in the ambiguities that characterize Wight’s thought. After all, as Carr (1961, p. 36) wrote, ‘it is not merely the events that are in flux. The historian himself is in flux’. Nonetheless, there are a few more transparent aspects to take into consideration. For instance, Wight (2005, p. 22) believed that the Machiavellian words he carefully imitated ‘express a universal experience of statecraft’. Shall we then take this statement as a definitive conclusion?



At the same time, Wight faced the difficulty of explaining in rational terms the whole of political and social mechanisms. From this perspective, history is always in motion and non-stationary. This movement is, however, neither progressive nor regressive, but simply unknown. The elusive presence of the historical forces called ‘fortune’ and ‘irony’ produces an almost unmanageable quality (and quantity) of political processes. *Peripeteia*, a sudden reversal or change in circumstances, is a crucial element; it represents a course of action aimed at achieving predetermined purposes, which ends up flowing into something different. ‘The results of human volition’ – Wight wrote in an early unpublished paper – ‘suffer a deflexion or obliquity, whereby they are always a caricature, never a reproduction of purpose’ (Wight, MSS/43, p. 4). In ‘Fortune’s Banter’ this concept becomes crucial: ‘*Peripeteia*, irony in action, the warping of political intention by the historical context, is the regular, repeated, one is tempted to say fundamental experience of international politics’ (Wight, 2016, p. 106).

It is the process by which the irony of politics manifests itself, through the deformation imposed by the historical context on the intention of those who are acting. A sketched but interesting example of Wight’s vision can be found in the lessons he held in the Fifties (coeval with his ‘Fortune’s Banter’). Drawing on Herbert Fischer’s book, *History of Europe*, Wight (1991, p. 29) states:

Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another ... only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and unforeseen. This is not a doctrine of cynicism and despair. The fact of progress is written large and plain on the page of history: but progress is not a law of nature. The ground gained by one generation may be lost by the next. The thoughts of men may flow into the channels which lead to disaster and barbarism.

In order to understand Wight’s position, as well as Machiavelli’s ideas on intangible historical forces, one needs to share their peculiar anthropological visions: a defective conception of the human being; an individual that is limited in his/her political thinking and acting. A conception that does not necessarily imply, nor corresponds to, anthropological pessimism. It is a position closer to historical and anthropological agnosticism and linked to the idea of ‘human indeterminacy’, according to which the element of human will to power is nonetheless constantly present. It simply does not imply the primacy of human capacity on the historical course often conferred elsewhere, especially in our times: this vision is resized, in its potential, by operating factors such as fortune and irony, and not the other way around.

At this conceptual level, then – and with no need of taking on a complex historical and intellectual discussion – there is critical evidence to support Wight’s and Machiavelli’s positions. As a matter of fact, in politics as well as in political theory,



research techniques do not possess the highest value and a perennial urgency, but it is ethics that governs political behaviour. This is the problem of political conduct of choosing between different and unpredictable courses of action. The nature of politics, particularly at international level, generates differences of *degree* rather than of *kind* in respect to those human dilemmas whose relevance never diminishes. According to Wight, in fact, not even momentous events, such as the advent of nuclear weapons, can change the essence of this condition. Consequently, he will always distrust the ‘ritual obeisances made in the direction of “the changing world”, that volatile goddess who is our Tyche or Fortuna [sic]’ (Wight, 1960, p. 497). It is for this reason that, where many see the appearance of ‘new’ events due to mere technical and material innovations, Wight emphasizes the elements of continuity with the past. For, from a political perspective, the search for discontinuity generates a paradox.

Political Progress and its Limits

This is a central aspect of this article: to both Niccolò Machiavelli and Martin Wight, the intellectual responses to the political dilemmas of their time seemed inadequate. This is also a central point that can be raised against those who tend to ignore or exclude the ‘human dimension’ from the art of politics. Being rather intractable, the human factor has been neglected or sidelined by many scholars who support the idea of progress in politics by means of a self-proclaimed ‘scientific’ analysis. The ambition to manipulate events, if well analyzed, as well as the ambition to predict their outcomes, would have been seen by Machiavelli and Wight as deleterious attempts to decipher the complexities of political reality, which is for them always refractory to such experiments. For reality is uncertain and unpredictable, something that is not possible to reduce to any ‘scientific’ formalization.

‘Scientific’ approaches exclude those circumstances considered ‘interference’ – primarily in terms of moral quality – and that require reflection and judgement on how to choose between equally possible political actions and different (or even opposite) values. In fact, these approaches try to create artificial conditions via which it should be possible to predict and control political phenomena. Nevertheless, these ‘intervening circumstances’ *are* the essence of politics, domain of repetition of intrinsic contradictions and recurrence of moral tensions. If politics has got any regularity, this would be the unpredictable, the uncertain and the paradoxical. A purpose of Machiavelli’s and Wight’s political theories is not to exclude this element of uncertainty and unpredictability, but rather to understand and to explain it, if possible, in a suitable way.

In politics, it goes without saying, there is recurrence but not fixity. As human history takes place, it moves forward. ‘Even vital interests can be eroded by time’, Wight wrote, because ‘all interests are subject to the flux of time’ (quoted in Vigezzi, 2005, p. 50).



Thus, for example, what many consider to be a permanent element in international politics, would be, in Wight's view, a merely contingent one.⁸ This is not because the definition of interests and actions are, in the end, established by historical agents. The emphasis here is not upon the uncovering of alleged eternal laws of politics, but rather upon the margins of freedom that the historical process grants to human beings, the constraints that influence political action, especially the boundaries of the historical responsibility of political agents, those who govern and those who agree or refuse to be governed.

This conception also presupposes an universal and regular structure of politics; yet, its understanding requires a concrete hermeneutic of historical situations in order to grasp its permanence and uniformity in a context of constant change. The polarizing logic of the 'scientist approach' to the study of politics, which dominated Western culture in Wight's times as it does today, pushed these methodological concerns to the margins. But this logic seemed to reproduce certain typical characteristics of the contributions to human knowledge that totally lacked the sense of irony, tending 'to remain as naïve as painting without chiaroscuro, as abstract as Newtonian physics in the universe of Planck and Einstein' (Wight, 2016, p. 111). In this sense, 'Fortune's Banter' is also a sort of mirror of a substantive debate never completely dormant in political and international studies.

A Polemical Reflex

Behind the polemics reflected in 'Fortune's Banter', it is also visible a critique of a certain form of utopianism, challenged by one of Wight's finest student, Bull (2000, p. 133): 'If there is a utopianism in the subject [International Relations] that is in need of deflation it is a utopianism that concerns not international politics but the limits of knowledge about it, the possibilities of a strictly scientific treatment of all its dimensions'. The problem is not merely that such scientific treatment does not apply to all dimensions of international politics: it does not apply to the most important dimension, the ethical one, which deals with a moral choice of the most urgent kind: what should we do?

This theoretical knot had been untied, with crystalline acumen, by Morgenthau (1962, p. 256) in his discussion of the political and intellectual functions of international theory. He states: 'Both Wight's and my orientation are historic, and it is this historic orientation that sets us apart from the presently fashionable theorizing about international relations. This theorizing is abstract in the extreme and totally unhistoric. It endeavours to reduce international relations to a system of abstract proposition with predictive function'. Morgenthau's (1962) conclusion captures a central point of our discussion: 'We are here in the presence of still another type of progressivist theory' (p. 256).



This critique refers to the idea that the study and practice of international politics are susceptible, especially considering the use of social science and its potential, of a progress similar to that of certain sciences, from which these dynamics are to be derived. Social scientists should therefore emulate some ambitions of economic science based on the models of abstract rationality, above all the provisional ones. Such abstractions, when applied to politics, do not actually reveal its *arcana* nor can they solve the dilemmas of moral action. They re-present, often in a complicated fashion, what in political theory has been known for centuries. If anything, they inhibit the comprehension of crucial aspects affecting the social dynamics of individuals, who are still moral entities.

This position does not end in an *ad hoc* controversy, but actually applies its critique to any field of political science, overcoming disciplinary boundaries and ideological differences. Proof of this can be found in Wight's evaluations of thinkers of comparable calibre, who have drawn deep furrows upon the problem of comprehension of history and politics. For instance, presenting the compendium of Arnold Toynbee's major work, Wight's (1947, p. 3) judgment is sharp but consistent with his vision: 'Professor Toynbee is not determinist, and in this lies his chief superiority over the morose Spengler, who saw societies growing and decaying with the fatality of vegetables' (Cf. Spengler, 1923). Against the analogy between political life and natural life, always suspect of organicism and determinism, Wight embraces, in other contexts, a similar position.

Events have an internal dimension constituted by the goals and the intents that contribute to generate them in the first place: humans' ideas. For this reason, for Wight what people think to do, besides what they actually do, is fundamental. The social universe has no meaning or purpose if it is not investigated from the viewpoint of the interaction occurring between individual intentions and actions, and it is this theoretical baggage that allows us to cross the 'depersonalised deserts of the social sciences' (Wight, 1949, p. 7). It is no coincidence that he admires Butterfield's 'awareness of the historical process itself'. He draws from him the initial confirmation of the importance of 'the play of chance and the ironies of fate and how human wills interweave with the texture of history' (*ibid.*, p. 7). In a paper dated 1950 we can find, perhaps for the first time publicly and directly invoked, the motives later discussed in 'Fortune's Banter'. In a stinging assessment regarding, not surprisingly, the relationship between the cognitive links and explanatory limits to which human knowledge is exposed in determining the ways and the causes of aggregation of social facts, Wight wrote (1950, p. 307):

History sees events as part of the time-process – *sub specie temporis*, the social sciences see them as illustrations of general laws and system of causation – *sub specie quantities*. And it seems that the social sciences, seeking as they do to establish system and pattern, uniformity and repetition in human affairs, may perhaps in their higher theoretical reaches have a bias toward determinist



conception of events and behaviour ... It is possible that ... causality and frequency distribution are only sophisticated versions of the ancient deities Fate and Luck.

Among various shortcomings, this kind of scientific approach neglects an important fact, namely, the effects of the influence of time on political outcomes are unpredictable, since the historical moment is always a dynamic datum, while the historical prediction is static. This approach posits, in fact, the future experience in politics, an inextricable coincidence of possibilities, as an already given system: choices are taken as deliberate, presumed events are considered regardless of their actual concatenation, necessarily unknown. Still, as a physicist wrote, time *indigete commune* [common God]⁹ binds everything to the same mystery and light (Toraldo di Francia, 1994, p. viii). Time is not a dimension but a process. Its passing shapes events, agents and political conditions.

The Reason of Time

As for Machiavelli and Morgenthau, so for Wight, it is especially the ‘utopia’ of predicting and controlling political outcomes, evaluating knowledge in the light of that imperative, which constitutes an unreasonable and sometimes even harmful pretension. It is the enduring obsession of the future that preoccupies individuals, by prompting them to adopt all means to acquire knowledge that is supposed to be objective, and to render appropriate the reference to ‘that comprehensive and practical predecessor of the social sciences, astrology’ (Wight, 2016, p. 202). It is known that astrology and its deterministic legacy, whose prestige is still disputed, is present in European culture since the twelfth century, and at least until its partial decline in the seventeenth century. Machiavelli’s conception of how *i segni celesti* [celestial signs] relate to reality is an intriguing example: ‘How this comes about I do not know, but both ancient and modern examples demonstrate that no serious event ever occurs in a city or a province that has not been predicted either by fortune-tellers, revelations, extraordinary events, or by other celestial signs’ (Machiavelli, 2008, p. 56). Moreover, a recent polemical debate is indicative of the enduring relevance of the issue. Some excerpts from Jacqueline Stevens’ (2012, p. 6) provocative article are, in this sense, indicative:

It’s an open secret in my discipline: in terms of accurate predictions (the field’s benchmark for what counts as science), my colleagues have failed spectacularly and wasted colossal amounts of time and money ... Careers were made, prizes awarded and millions of research dollars distributed to international relations experts, even though Nancy Reagan’s astrologer may have had superior forecasting skills.



Wight's analysis is in line with Machiavelli's vision of a rationally unpredictable future, and the role played by pure chance: 'Machiavelli records how Cesare said to him that he, Cesare, had thought of everything that might happen when his father died, and had made every provision for the continuation of his own power, except that he had not foreseen what actually happened – that when the Pope died he himself should also be desperately ill' (Wight, 2016, p. 87). Wight in fact proceeds, in a peculiar but effective way, to illustrate the never-ending attempt to acquire the 'absurd capacity', inaccessible in the political sphere, to predict the future. Here we hear in some way the echo of the Machiavellian theme: 'The future is the opposite of Machiavelli's Fortune: she smiles most kindly on those who have done their duty without trying to force her' (Wight, 2016, p. 92). The culmination of this endeavour is one of the most ambitious theoretical and ideological systems ever built, to which Wight assigns, in this perspective, a deficient status. Wight places it on the same level of the astrologers who provided Albrecht von Wallenstein,¹⁰ 'with predictive power more accurate and apposite than that of the Marxian dialectic, and demonstrate in advance misfortunes that could be averted and opportunities that could be seized' (Wight, 2016, p. 102).

Clearly, the inversion of time, suggested by a vision focused on the future, cannot satisfy Wight. And this is not just a theoretical position. In 'Fortune's Banter', he distinguishes between statespersons' different perceptions of history: 'For a sense of historical responsibility is paradoxically different from a belief in one's historical role, which means a belief that one can mould the future; it rather goes with a belief in one's political role, which means making the best choices in the present, and implies moderation and a knowledge of the limits of political action' (ibid., p. 92). This assumption has a notable implication: 'One might venture the generalisation, that most of the statesmen we are inclined to call great [...] see themselves as instruments rather than makers of destiny. They have retained a certain humility, which tends to get lost when they come to think of themselves as playing, not simply a political role but a historical one' (ibid., p. 93).

Accordingly, it is in the present that political quality seeks to embody and to find a form in an unpredictable success. Yet, like Machiavelli, Wight thinks that the time of politics is the time of chance, the timely decision in the favourable moment, Machiavelli's *occasione*. For this reason, he analyses the impact of the politician's will upon political fatality using the chronological category of 'opportunism' which, at its more reflective level, 'embodies a conception of the *kairos*, the transient opportunity' (ibid., p. 97), the propitious moment for action. That opportunity is a possibility for today or tomorrow, yet certainly a matter of human will and discernment, as we shall see.

The Essence of Political Realism. Tragedy or Irony?

Put it into perspective, 'Fortune's Banter' is not a neglected or marginal text but a very relevant one to understand Machiavelli's legacy on Wight's thought.



This is deducible from the content of the lectures given by the author at the London School of Economics and Political Science (Wight, 2005). We have seen that those papers contain ideas similar to the ones presented here; even identical passages, especially on the acute profile of Machiavelli, written to deliver the LSE lectures and never published at the time. However, the material is still incandescent because of the tension generated by the contingent political dilemmas of Wight's time and his urgent need of concrete answers to world politics' issues. There is, for instance, a tense and singular confrontation with Reinhold Niebuhr – 'Patriarch' of the realists, as Wight (2016, p. 104) defines him – about the meaning of the strategy of nuclear deterrence, the balance of terror, the most distressing problem in Europe during the bipolar period. In a very peculiar way, the debate develops around two classical concepts applied to international politics as a realm of human action: tragedy and irony. It is an existential confrontation, not abstract at all, generated by the possibility of a nuclear war. As Niebuhr (1952, pp. ix–x) writes in the famous book on the ironical quality of the American history, recalled but not quoted in 'Fortune's Banter':

The tragic element in a human situation is constituted of conscious choices of evil for the sake of good. If men or nations do evil in a good cause; if they cover themselves with guilt in order to fulfil some high responsibility; or if they sacrifice some high value for the sake of a higher or equal one they make a tragic choice. Thus the necessity of using the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for the preservation of peace is a tragic element in our contemporary situation. Tragedy elicits admiration as well as pity because it combines nobility with guilt.

Wight's (2005, pp. 18–19) indirect reply to Niebuhr is fierce and thoughtful, and deserves to be quoted at length, as he classifies the American theologian in the categorical terms drawn up on his international theory, stating that:

Irony is, so to speak, the factual skeleton of tragedy, stripped of its moral and transcendental clothing ... Niebuhr, a Christian Machiavellian, in his *Irony of American History* falsifies the relation of irony and tragedy ... [He] sees 'the necessity of using the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for the preservation of peace ... [as] a tragic element in our contemporary situation' ... It is not tragic, but ironic only; it is not tragic, because we are involved in it, we cannot be detached about it. Tragic vision has a movement, or rhythm: first an initial standpoint outside the drama, detachment; then a self-projection into the drama, identification; and lastly, the discovery of the universal relevance of the drama, the recognition of having been told a truth about all mankind, including ourselves ... but there is no such movement of tragic understanding in relation to our contemporary situation. The only emotion we can feel about the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for peace is self-pity, and this is not a tragic emotion: it is notoriously the most unpurifying and impure of all emotions, the very opposite of self-recognition as part of universal humanity.



There are several points in this reflection that are expressed in the language of need: the need to respond to urgent and vital questions and, as for Machiavelli, not to abstract theory. If ‘Machiavelli is writing for the instruction of the politician’ (Wight, 2016, p. 82), Wight is writing for the instruction of the committed citizen.¹¹ He was an engaged scholar and an activist, deeply concerned with the practice of international politics (Chiaruzzi, 2008; Hall, 2014). However, contrary to the duty of the Florentine Secretary, Wight’s vision flows from a strategically elaborated thinking of someone who lives together with other men and women, reading politics as a definition of a common destiny, a ‘global covenant’ (Jackson, 2000). It is a thinking that does not serve a party, a State, one of the political unities that constitute the international society. It serves, instead, at least ideally, the entire category of the whole humankind, even if divided into sovereign and armed communities.

This is the level of the political tension that invested Wight’s generation of scholars, who did not ignore the abyss but stared at its depth without looking away. Thus, Wight’s attention focuses on Niebuhr’s use of tragedy, criticized for not being able to understand the nature of what is tragic in politics. The dispute is over the principle of necessity that is invoked as a justification to support the nuclear threat, a factor that undermines understanding to the point of generating suspicion. In a note to ‘Fortune’s Banter’ there is an observation that could be useful to unravel the knot of this dispute. There, writing about Machiavelli, the archetypical political realist, Wight states, ‘*necessità* is an important concept in the *Discorsi*, but always as a subjective experience of the coercion of events, never as objective causality’ (Wight, 2016, p. 150).

It is not therefore the pretension to keep in check the principle of necessity that drives Wight’s criticism of Niebuhr, but the fact that, in the subjective-objective relationship, political decisions regard the links of the first type, not of the second. Occulted by this characteristic, necessity – as a principle of political action – implies some degree of illusion or, worse, of intellectual dishonesty. This, in fact, implies that the agent is not given any possible choice, and all that is left to him or her is just taking an *inevitable* decision to fulfil an *inevitable* evil. This is, of course, false in politics, where at least an alternative between a lesser evil and major evil is always given. Invoking necessity, defending a political decision with its alleged historical inevitability, means denying the validity of ethical principles, the plurality of selection criteria, denying thus the possibility of different courses of action, since they are deemed to be non-existent or impossible.

Wight is very distant from those positions, unavailable to this form of denial. Whereupon, he equates Niebuhr’s position to an emotional state – in the end politically inert – of self-pity, which finds into tragedy a delightful and immobilizing viaticum:

Tragedy implies a standpoint outside the political drama ... Now, it is difficult to adopt a tragic standpoint about politics, because ‘politics’ implies a situation



in which we are still involved, where we can still act and affect the outcome, and anyway where we do not know the outcome because the drama is unfinished. To become fully tragic, politics have to be dead politics, that is, history (Wight, 2005, p. 17).

In the end, a central argument should be carefully pondered because it questions the traditional correspondence established between political realism and tragic vision of politics: that is, the time of history and the time of politics do not coincide, as it were; they are distinct times. The first is past, the second is present. The present is the time of politics, the time of action, and not of self-pity. It is a moment of responsibility, moderation and active involvement; although fallible, political action intervenes in the course of events with unnecessary but unknown outcome. A passage in 'Fortune's Banter' summarizes this disposition, where Wight (2016) seems to glimpse the essence of political realism in a 'concern with the living present, as against dead past and unknown future' (p. 92). Embracing Wight's ideas and vision, then, implies that the chronological correspondence and political coherence between the realist vision and the tragic vision of politics become more nuanced and, perhaps, less obvious.¹²

Conclusion

As for Machiavelli, Wight's main concern when exploring fortune in politics is to understand the process and the dynamics of political action, their concatenations and the nature of the forces affecting it, so as to fix the ethical problem of political conduct. The search for some ironical quality of politics expresses the finalization of a precise commitment: knowing and acknowledging the limits of politics *vis-à-vis* the value of politics does not equate to the negation of politics itself. On the contrary, this is the practical refraction of Wight's intellectual effort: treating human freedom in the political realm as a *quid medium* between determinism – the utter indifference to choices – and the autonomy of human subjectivity – the absolute controlling capacity of political action. This is what he wrote in his comment to Toynbee's major work: 'In the last analysis the fate of our civilization rests in our hands' (Wight, 1947, p. 3).

As already mentioned, Wight's 'Fortune' Banter' begins with Machiavelli, and precisely with his engagement with the relation between *fortuna* and *virtù*, that 'attempt by a political scientist to describe the limits of freedom in political experience'. It is a constantly diverted experience and, in terms of development and outcomes, largely made by imponderable forces which are external to the will and strategy of the agents. Forces that are, they too, almost imponderable. It is in the attempt to understand and control the constraints exercised by such forces on action that the moral and causal complexity of politics is to be found. In the end, however, Wight (1952, p. 348) believes that these dimensions of political complexity are



balanced and practically inextricable: ‘*virtù* and *fortuna* are opposite sides of the Machiavellian coin’.

Not everything is possible in politics. Nevertheless, human alternatives are constantly open to the world of possible, in a stream perpetually overwhelmed by the untameable impetus of historical forces. Human beings, however, may oppose historical forces by means of their own values and capacities, whatever they might be. It is true that, in politics, agents stand in front of an inescapable fate, constantly directed towards points of crisis, massive disruptions affecting social coexistence. Still, this is what politics is, a recurrence of critical points and perpetual tensions. It is worth remembering that, after all, the etymological root of the word ‘crisis’ refers to ‘choice, decision’. Hard choices and decisions do not annihilate the power of will; they do not occlude the human capacity for self-determination and success, together with the possibility to reverse, albeit tentatively, an imminent adversity. In any case, Machiavelli’s last words in a combative chapter on fortune’s malignity are dedicated to hope being the last political duty: ‘But, for all that, they [men] must never lose heart ... They have always room for hope, and ought never to abandon it, whatsoever befalls, and into whatsoever straits they come’ (Machiavelli, 1883, p. 312). Sometimes hope is a political virtue.

According to Machiavelli, *virtù* is the human potential ability to govern the historical forces called *fortuna*. In fact, we may say in conclusion that such is the profound meaning of Machiavelli’s fundamental agonistic formula that Wight fails to note: *fortuna* ‘shows her power where *virtù* has not prepared to resist her’ (Machiavelli, 1891, p. 358).¹³ I have no means of knowing why this formula does not appear in Wight’s texts. Be that as it may, Leo Strauss’s offers an elaborate, remarkable reflection on this point: ‘*Fortuna* is a part, and not the ruling part, of the whole. The whole is ruled by heaven ... Heaven leaves room for human causation, for action, for prudence and for art. *Fortuna* belongs to the same domain to which art and prudence belong’. Thus, ‘*Fortuna* is thought to be the cause of men’s good or ill fortunes. But if one looks more closely, one sees that in the most important cases “the cause of (good) fortune” is not *fortuna* but human virtue and good institutions’ (Strauss, 1958, pp. 214–217).

Wight’s failure notwithstanding, the conclusion of ‘Fortune’s Banter’ invokes the strength of individuals against historical forces. It gives, in fact, the final word to a rebel – John Ball. He eventually recognizes, even in defeat, victory as much as possible unpredictable and, basically, inexplicable, perhaps even futile. Quoting Morris (1896), Wight’s final statement sounds like a call for that calm uprising against irony etched in history as an indelible stigma: ‘I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name’ (Wight, 2016, p. 113). But the strength evoked here is not vacuous, because the possibility of understanding the recurrent antinomies between intentions, actions and their consequences is a vivid trait of what may be called political consciousness.



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About the Author

Michele Chiaruzzi holds a PhD from the Scuola Superiore di Studi Storici. He is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Political Sciences, University of Bologna, and a Life Member of Clare Hall College, Cambridge. He has been a Visiting Fellow in the University of London (LSE), University of Cambridge, Brown University, University of Queensland, and the Bruno Kessler Foundation in Trento. His recent publications are the result of a research on the nexus between theory and practice in international politics. They include 'L'incoerenza della politica. Nodi teorici, dilemmi pratici, categorie di comprensione', *Quaderni di scienza politica*, 22, no. 1: (2015), 151–71. His latest book is *Martin Wight on Fortune and Irony in Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2016).

Notes

- 1 This is Pericles' last speech before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. Needless to say, Pericles' funeral oration is his most studied speech (Thucydides, 1921, II, pp. 34–46).
- 2 For a complete view on Hayek's thought on this argument, see Hayek (1952).
- 3 This unpublished paper, as well as other Wight's papers, can be read at the Martin Wight Archive, British Library of Political and Economics Sciences, London.
- 4 Interestingly enough, the first comprehensive anthology of Machiavelli's writings on International Relations was published in the twenty-first century by Cesa (2014).
- 5 On the British Committee and its members, particularly Wight and Bull, see Hall (2006), Vigezzi (1993, 2005) and Dunne (1998).
- 6 'Journalist the True Contemporary Historians', *Irish Independent*, 19 May 1960, p. 3.
- 7 Author's translation.
- 8 In the nineteenth century it was a British vital interest to prevent Russia from taking Constantinople; however, in 1915 Britain consented to that. Imperial Germany regarded maritime expansion as a vital interest; Nazi Germany regarded that as an illusion and pursued expansion in Eastern Europe instead. In 1934, Mussolini regarded it as a vital interest to prevent the union of Austria with Germany; in 1938, he acquiesced in it. Cf. Wight (1978, pp. 95–96).



- 9 The *di indigetes* or *indigites* were Roman guardian deities not adopted from other religions, as distinguished from the *di novensides*.
- 10 A general in the Thirty Years' War, the Bohemian apostate Protestant Wallenstein (1583–1634) is a complex and somewhat mysterious figure. In 1625, he rose to the command of the imperial army funded by the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II for service against the Protestant princes of Germany. Later, he began to pursue his own designs and became powerful, entering into a complicated intrigue with Saxony, Sweden, Brandenburg, and France. His own men assassinated him.
- 11 As Wight (1991, p. 268) pointed out to his students, 'of course, if one is preoccupied with the need to impart advice to those who conduct foreign policy, one will have to know where one stand. But it is desirable, and certainly not impossible, to combine the urgency of the committed citizen with the philosophical detachment of a student of international politics'.
- 12 Notoriously, the correspondence between political realism and tragedy has received specific attention also in International Relations; see, among others, Lebow (2003) and Erskine and Lebow (2012). See also Brown (2007).
- 13 'Similmente interviene della fortuna, la quale dimostra la sua potenza *dove non è ordinata virtù a resisterle*'; author's translation, emphasis added.

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