

REVIEW

Refounding Modern Political Thought

Diego A. von Vacano 2007. *The Art of Power. Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 216 pp.

Annabel Brett, James Tully, with Holly Hamilton-Bleakley (eds.) 2007. *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 308 pp.

Paul-Erik Korvela

In this review essay I will deal with two books that, in their different ways, both focus on the very foundations of modern political theory. *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* is a book compiled to celebrate Quentin Skinner's classic study *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, which was published by Cambridge University Press in 1978. *Rethinking the Foundations* looks afresh at the impact of Skinner's book. The compilation presents a group of distinguished contributors paying their homage to Skinner. Skinner himself has written an essay in which he reflects the context of his classic study and comments the other articles included in the collection. I will, however, commence my review with another book, namely Diego A. von Vacano's *The Art of Power*. Vacano's book focuses on a very important

but often neglected connection in political theory, that between Machiavelli and Nietzsche.

While Vacano's book has originated as a sort of comparative study of Machiavelli's and Nietzsche's central ideas, the result is much more. Vacano uncovers the implications of their common way of looking at the human condition and political practice to elucidate the persistence of an aesthetic dimension of politics. The two writers shared the view that sensory cognition is fundamental to political practice. In a marked contrast to Plato, and to Kant, they, rather than strictly adhering to pure reason abstracted from the senses, pointed to the worldly, corporeal basis of our understanding of our surroundings. Therefore their aesthetic is distinctively modern, like Baumgartner's, which means that it does not place beauty in its centre but emphasizes the sensory perception of all things, beautiful and ugly alike. For Machiavelli and Nietzsche the aesthetic refers to human cognition through the senses, but also to the artistic element in practice. Vacano claims that unlike Plato, Machiavelli saw no quarrel between philosophy and poetry – instead, there is a happy marriage between form and content, philosophy and poetry, in the writings of the Florentine, which actually leads to a kind of “philosophy of life”. Machiavelli's philosophy of life, his view of the human condition, is a radical critique of the deontological, normative political theory model established by Plato and elevated by posterity to a dominant paradigm for the academic study of the subject.

It is precisely this shattering of an illusion that Nietzsche found appealing in Machiavelli's writings. Machiavelli questioned the Platonic illusion of a coherent ethical and rational essence in reality, which was still dominant, although in slightly different forms, in Scholasticism. For Machiavelli, the world is not a rational whole, an elaborate system of correspondences, or a morally coherent order where good actions produce good results. Where Plato, Aristotle and Dante could find order, Machiavelli seems to find only fragile and contingent relations. For Machiavelli, there can be greatness in bad deeds as well. It is the propensity to become fascinated by the spectacles of political life in all its extremes, passing no moral judgements while watching them, and describing horrible deeds with the Italian playful *allegriissimo*, that the German philosopher admired in the Florentine secretary. The bringing of new “tablets” by Nietzsche is akin to Machiavelli's “new modes and orders”, and they both targeted Christianity especially. In Machi-

avelli and Nietzsche “being” is unhinged from its transcendental anchors, and “becoming” from its inherent ends. Similarly, the possibility of securing a stable basis for knowledge is dismissed in favour of a thoroughgoing perspectivism and a distinct form of phenomenism.

In addition, the two thinkers share a tragic or existential attitude towards life that serves as a foundation for a distinctively sceptical attitude towards modernity. Their political recommendations are naturally very different, but they surely water at the same oases as regards the origin of those ideas. The tragic attitude is clearly present in Machiavelli’s literary works, e.g. the poem *L’Asino*, which forms an important source for Vacano’s analysis. It pervades, however, his political works as well. The archetypal hero of *Il Principe*, Cesare Borgia, ultimately fails. So does Castruccio Castracani in *Vita di Castruccio Castracani*. But this leads von Vacano to put forth an interesting point. Despite the numerous attempts to “save” the benign Machiavelli by emphasizing his alleged republicanism, there are good reasons to argue that he is not a republican figure. Vacano draws attention to Machiavelli’s own aesthetic ambition, his wish to draw a picture of his own perspective on political power for the world to admire as superior to others. On the other hand, the hero of *Il Principe* is not Italian, nor republican. Castruccio Castracani is no lover of republican rule either. If one believes that Machiavelli’s originality is restricted to the revival of classical humanism and anti-Papal Florentine republicanism, the question of his admiration for these figures is baffling.

Nevertheless, I think Machiavelli’s clearest divorce from republicanism is his acknowledgement of religion as *instrumentum regni*. Religion, Machiavelli argues, is a tool used by the rulers to control the masses. But, significantly, this idea cannot be incorporated to the Aristotelian/republican idea of “ruling and being ruled with others”. It is a capacity of the politically savvy to see through religion, and conversely the masses obey religion because they do not know that it is a tool of politics. Since these are cognitive capabilities, they do not change. I mean that if a person ruling has come to understand that religion is mere delusion, he does not forget that when he leaves the office. Therefore, he simply cannot be a “ruled” in the same sense as the rest of the *molti*, the many who are not in power. Even in *Il Principe* Machiavelli makes his famous distinction between those who understand everything by themselves, those who understand when it is explained, and those who do not understand even after the explanation.

These capabilities do not change: there will always be rulers and ruled and there will be no republican circulation in this sense.

On the other hand, in Vacano's view (and in my view as well) Machiavelli's admiration for Borgia is not political but moral, or to be more precise, anti-moral. Ethics as the "philosophy of desirability", as Nietzsche labelled it, hides the fact that sometimes what is cannot be overcome. For Machiavelli and for Nietzsche, the perspective clearly is on what is and not on what ought to be.

But there are problems in anti-morality in general and in Machiavelli's anti-morality in particular if this is seen in the light of normative political theory. There are claims of morality involved. Beyond their largely polemical and cynical relation to the traditional foundations of knowledge and morality, Machiavelli and Nietzsche are both quite willing to lay claims to certain truths of their own. And in this sense, it is hard to speak of anti-morality. There is also the general problem that if A is a moral claim, then not-A is also a moral claim and one of them, A or its opposite, is necessarily true. Hence, some sort of moral claims do exist even in repudiation of morality. In a way, Machiavelli's own aesthetic ambition is a morality rather than anti-morality and as such also normative to some extent. Likewise, Machiavelli's own recommendations are in a way normative, since he judges actions with the criteria of success, aggrandizement, or maintaining one's position. Hence success, if nothing else, becomes a normative ideal.

The book closes with a reflection on the value of images and spectacles in post 9/11 politics. Curiously, only things that are seen do really "exist" in world politics: Reagan's "operation" in Nicaragua seems like a distant echo since it did not appear daily on television screens. Its absence from visual perception has a way of diminishing its existence, makes it seem like it did not happen at all. On the contrary, the Mesopotamian adventure of George W. Bush was a theatrically orchestrated delusion, Colin Powell showing images of dark cylinders and thereby winning over some sort of "coalition of the willing" to support the errand of the Leo-cons of the Defence Department. It seems that deception, that quality of art Plato had assailed, was once again shown to be part and parcel of politics. But the point is that images matter, and the pictures from Abu Ghraib made a difference compared to the situation that there would have been only rumours that such actions took place.

REVIEW

In a way, Vacano's book is a serious attempt to refound modern political thought, or to rethink its foundations. It is a very important work in two respects: firstly, in highlighting the connection between Machiavelli and Nietzsche (when will somebody add Marquis de Sade to this anti-Christian current in political theory?) and secondly in focusing on aesthetic dimensions of politics. Setting the sensual and corporeal against the rational and abstract is a useful way to rethink contemporary politics also.

Another rethinking is offered in the collection of essays around Skinner's *Foundations*. Skinner's *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* was, in a sense, a revolution in two volumes. Both of the books contained a dramatic predating. The first volume boldly contested the Baron thesis and further developed the ideas of Paul Oskar Kristeller: the origins of humanism and modern political thought were moved from early *quattrocento* to a much earlier period, to the political experiences of the comuni of Northern Italy. The second volume contradicted the thesis of Michael Walzer that the theory of political revolution originated in distinctive aspects of Protestant theology. Skinner unveiled the medieval and hence distinctively Catholic roots of theories of constitutionalism and resistance and thereby dismissed the commonly cherished assumption of the "modernisation thesis" that early-modern Protestantism was the midwife of modern political thought. The books also dated the birth of modern sovereignty to medieval developments. To some extent, as Marco Geuna brilliantly argues in his article, Skinner was also putting forth an interpretation of republicanism which was radically opposed to the paradigmatic Pocockian interpretation, for Skinner breaks the continuity between Aristotelianism and republicanism. In addition to these "revolutions" in the subject matters, the books contained a revolution in the manner in which political theory was to be understood and how the history of political ideas was to be written. Although the books were not about method in itself they self-consciously aimed to exemplify a method no less revolutionary.

Some of the articles in *Rethinking the Foundations* contain autobiographical reflections by Skinner's colleagues and former students. They are useful in illuminating Skinner's "context" and his intentions. Here, I would like to make one brief autobiographical reflection of my own regarding Skinner's *Foundations*. When I, in the late 1990s, as an undergraduate started to read Skinner's book I understood basically

nothing of its abovementioned revolutionary character. *Foundations* were then, as still today, in the curriculum of political science at the University of Jyväskylä, and there was then, as still today, a constant mutiny among students to remove the books from the curriculum. In some sense, the history of medieval and early-modern political theory introduced in the *Foundations* appeared to my fellow-students as almost mythopoeic.¹ I remember the discussions among students ten years ago: the *Foundations* were long and tiresome to read, full of names you had never encountered in any other work etc. The name-dropping earned the book certain nicknames among students of political science. It was occasionally labelled as “a medieval phonebook” or “the *Silmarillion* of political theory” (*Silmarillion* is a mythopoeic and quite frankly a rather boring book by J.R.R. Tolkien, full of names like the Exodus in the Bible). In this sense, I am actually now surprised to realize that one of the revolutionary points in the *Foundations* was that none of its chapters bore the names of persons. There are no chapters titled “Dante”, “Hobbes” etc. I am also quite surprised to notice that in this respect *Rethinking the Foundations* has to some extent abandoned Skinner’s approach and taken a step back towards “the Canon” for there are three (!) articles on Hobbes bearing his name and one on Machiavelli and Thomas More respectively. None of the chapters focus on Bartolus of Saxoferrato or the like. The fact that Skinner used many authors one truly had not encountered in any other work was likewise one of its groundbreaking features.

In general, Skinner focused on the *longue durée* (although some of his chapters bore titles like “The Renaissance”, thereby implying a moment or decisive shift). This approach leads to certain problems, as some of the essays in *Rethinking the Foundations* suggest. There is an element of teleology involved in Skinner’s treatment of the subject, as the title itself suggests. The kind of “*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*” type of argumentation in political ideologies is of course liable to criticism, but most likely this kind of approach is to some extent unavoidable if any “stories” are to be written. His “ideology”, a term that surfaces often in the *Foundations*, is not the Marxist version of distorted consciousness but the Weberian sense of discourse of legitimation. The “archeology” of Skinner, i.e. constructing ideological arches expanding from one writer to another, easily turns the field into a battlefield of isms or languages or “discourses”, thereby ousting the authors (I think this is nowadays a pending problem in many theories of inter-

national relations). But as Skinner explicates in the concluding essay to the collection, he nevertheless wanted to save the author from the Foucaultian death because in his view Foucault is helpless to explain the conceptual changes taking place when a given *episteme* is challenged.

It is also clear that Skinner's discussion of the development of the modern state is biased towards its functions as a municipal authority and impervious to its role in relations with other states. In other words, Skinner is very much interested in the state's domestic role and remains almost silent, except for some discussions on the law of nations, about its external relations. Some classical authors like Hobbes, as David Armitage rightly observes in his article, did not have as much to say about the relations between states, as many theorists of international relations would like him to have said. But still this dimension of their theories, although occasionally consisting only of scattered and terse remarks, is an inseparable part of the whole, and should receive due attention. And the inevitable growth in the role of the state in its relations with other states is equally important as its internal powers. The *regnum*s of medieval Europe did not have proper external relations because all Europeans were, for many important purposes - for example those of education, or those of canon law - part of the same religious community. During the Middle Ages in Europe the same sense of unity that led men to think of themselves as living in one society under the rule of common law made it difficult for them to formulate a theory of diplomatic principles. A modern sense of the "international society" with heterogeneous agents and equal states, sovereign and completely independent, would have shocked the idealism and common sense of the fifteenth century. Such a society would have seemed a repulsive anarchy, a contradiction to basic assumptions of a hierarchically ordered universe and thus almost a blasphemy, as some historians of diplomacy have suggested. With the reality of the partial and overlapping sovereignties of Medieval Europe, who was to say which of them were to be granted and which denied the right to negotiate with others?

By the sixteenth century, however, the situation changed, and to my understanding this development is one which *Foundations* more or less ignores. Whereas the earlier assumptions of feudalism were that the ruler is part of a harmonious whole both domestically and externally, Machiavelli's analysis spells out that "a prince ought to

have two fears, one from within, on account of his subjects, the other from without, on account of external powers" (*Il Principe*, XIX). The harmony has been shattered and the ruler has to be afraid of his subjects as well as foreign powers. For Hobbes, the main duties of the sovereign are to ensure the security of its citizens from both internal and external threats. This Machiavellian-Hobbesian way is worlds apart from the classical vision of men gathering together because of speech and reason to live in justice and good government. Since the thirteenth century, when a recognizable language of politics re-emerged, politics and its synonyms like civil discipline, civil philosophy, civil science, civil prudence etc. only meant the art of good government and the art of preserving a city – understood as a community of individuals living in justice. Maurizio Viroli has convincingly argued that the difference between this neo-classical conception and what became known as "reason of state" is manifested in ends as well as means. Politics aimed at upholding a legitimate political constitution according to reason and justice. Reason of state aimed at the preservation and aggrandizement of the state regardless of its origin and legitimacy. But there is also a great difference in these conceptions as regards the external relations of the community. Likewise, the territorial sovereignty, not mentioned in the treatises but effectively implemented in Westphalia, differed from the medieval conceptions. First of all, the treatises of Westphalia set the foundation for an international law *between* states as opposed to the older conception of a law *above* the states. Law subsequently became defined in terms of treaties the sovereigns consented to, rather than something that emanated from God or nature. Therefore, it sanctified through multilateral consent something the medieval authorities had been unilaterally claiming for centuries: exclusive legal authority within the realm, and legal equality between realms

The absence of any sustained treatment in the *Foundations* of the foundations of modern "international relations", or "international theory" (in the terminology of Martin Wight and the English school of International Relations), as part of political thought was, according to Armitage's article, typical for the time when the book appeared. *Ex post facto* it might be worth noticing that Skinner made many revolutions in his book and shook many sensitivities: maybe it would not have been too much to expect him to be atypical to the time in this respect as well.

REVIEW

Mark Goldie's article and Skinner's response to it in his concluding essay look forward to a generic expansion of political theory. Instead of focusing only on self-confessedly political texts as a means of mounting political arguments, we should recognise that the poet, the musician and the artist are equally capable of legitimising or challenging existing institutions and beliefs, and may even be capable of doing so more forcefully. In the era of movies and the Internet, the possibilities of political theorizing and political action are widening all the time. If we return to Vacano's aesthetic political theory, we should also start to take seriously the non-linguistic persuasion or the rhetorical force of non-verbal actions. In one of the most cited passages of *Il Principe*, Machiavelli describes the actions of Duke Valentino towards his lieutenant in Romagna: because of the cruelties committed by the lieutenant, the Duke had him cut in two pieces and left him on the piazza at Cesena with a block of wood and a bloody knife at his side. According to Machiavelli, the barbarity of this spectacle caused the people to be at once satisfied and dismayed. No words were uttered, no books written. You can kill kings with swords but you need words to rule out monarchy, it is said. This may very well be true, but the rhetorical force of non-verbal spectacles should not be underestimated.

Both of the two books focus, as the title of this review essay suggests, on the very foundations of modern political thought and to some extent refound those foundations. *Rethinking the Foundations* studies the foundations of modern political thought through Skinner's book, and Vacano calls into question certain traditions and approaches in modern political thought. Curiously, both works implicitly or explicitly justify the widening of the scope of political theory. Skinner acknowledges that the early operas of Verdi contributed to the revival of *libertà*, the rallying cry of the Italian Risorgimento, as much as the speeches of Cavour or writings of Mazzini. The aesthetic and sensual dimensions further widen the scope, and the notion of a distinct "history of political theory" begins to melt into air.

NOTES

1. Mythopoeia is a narrative genre where a fictional mythology is created by the author.