

Languages of Empire in Early-Modern Political Theory:
from Machiavelli's Roman Paradigm
to the Modern 'Empire of Commerce'

My purpose here is to work out a general interpretative scheme of theories of empire in the formative period of modern political theory. More precisely, I propose to clarify the development of ideas from the 'Romanism' of Machiavelli's idea of empire to the modern 'commercial' perspective which came to dominate eighteenth-century political thinking. The change from Romanism to the commercial perspective, I shall argue, was no less than a change of paradigm.

As against the traditional humanist equation of 'civic virtue' with an armed and aggressive 'imperial virtue, the new political ethic was based on the principles of 'modern civility'. 'Sweet commerce', as Montesquieu put it, was at the heart of an ethos of peaceful sociability and interdependence between different peoples. Hence the new imperial thinkers came to repudiate the old ideal of empires for 'expansion' adopting the alternative option of empires for 'preservation', thus reversing the order of choice of a basic dilemma originally posed by Machiavelli himself.

A polity concerned with 'preservation' would attain 'greatness' through wealth and trade rather than conquest and territorial acquisition. Trade was the true basis of wealth and power. The commercial, maritime character of the British empire made it the paradigmatic form of empire in the modern world. As Montesquieu pointed out in his *Esprit des Lois*, the British type of empire possessed a paradigmatic relevance by virtue of its being uniquely successful in combining freedom and extent, empire and 'modern liberty'.

The dichotomy of Roman and commercial paradigms of empire should be seen as a reflection of two major strands of ideological thought, the republican tradition of civic virtue and the new liberal ideology of 'modern commercial civility' – between, more famously put by Constant, the 'liberty of the ancients' and the 'liberty of the moderns'. Both perspectives present in turn strong internal subdivisions each envisaging a different model of empire. As we shall see, there are republican versions of the 'empire of commerce', while the modernist perspective on empire equally presents internal differences reflecting concerns and ideas typical of the republican tradition. In other terms, there is no symmetrical correspondence between ideological foundation and theories of empire. This implies that the new concept of 'empire' of commerce', far from having a definite meaning and connotation, can only be understood in relation to the specific constellation of categories and values of which it constitutes an integral part.

The competing varieties of thought about empire, which can be discerned in the extended debates of the time, are therefore to be held a most significant point of the present enquiry. This is so, not just on the more obvious plane of the historical narrative, but also on the methodological plane. My contention is that, in order to describe and explain the historical 'reality' of the modern 'empires of commerce', a meaningful description and explanation must always include in the first place – and perhaps even take the form of – an attempt to recover and interpret their meaning from the point of view of coeval intellectual culture.

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My organizing principle of the narrative is the idea that the whole process is governed by the conceptual system elaborated by Machiavelli in his *Discourses on the first Decade of Titus Livius*. Here Machiavelli furnished the basic categories in which the imperial theme was discussed throughout various distinct historical phases, until the time which saw the emergence of the new modernist paradigm. In one sense, as we shall see, even the new paradigm can be interpreted as a transformation of the Machiavellian paradigm from within - provided we disregard its ideological substance which was inimical to modern liberty, and consider only its overall conceptual structure.

If Machiavelli's scheme plays a pivotal role in early-modern discourse about empire, it was not the only schema in the story. Ideas about empire were also sustained by two other major strands of discourse, namely the Christian medieval language of 'universal monarchy' on one hand and the various arguments deployed in order to justify the colonial expansion of Europe on the other.

The language of universal monarchy, evoking the Dantesque project of a world under 'one shepherd with one flock' in a reign of perpetual peace, became prominent again in post-Reformation Europe, especially in connection with the Counter-Reformation and the competition between Habsburg and Bourbon for political hegemony through to the age of Louis XIV.

As regards the large-scale European seizure of overseas territories from the sixteenth century onwards, it must be emphasized that such a phenomenon turns out to be grounded on a quite distinct cluster of justifications, among which the 'civilizing' purpose, including the conversion of native peoples to Christianity, figures prominently. In sharp contrast with this pre-eminently Aristotelian and Greek tradition, it is the patriotism of the Roman tradition, stressing the legitimacy of war for the glory and advancement of one's *respublica*, that played a primary role in inspiring and characterizing the Machiavellian scheme of thought.

The Machiavellian influence was dominant because the paramount problem of early-modern political theory was not overseas colonization, but rather the new structure of order that was coming into being in Europe, namely the modern sovereign state. The issue of overseas empires came to occupy centre-stage much later, when in the eighteenth-century the first phase of the European colonial expansion was coming to an end. At that juncture an extended, theoretically complex, debate about the nature and purpose of empire took place. More specifically, as we have already hinted, the leading themes of the debate concerned the deleterious consequences of over-extension, the dynamics of expansion, decadence and consequent collapse, the study of the impact of economics in politics, and the question of the form of government appropriate to different extents of territory. The imperial theme came thus to acquire the status of a semi-autonomous domain of enquiry, the terms of which became in turn crucially relevant in determining the solution of the problem of the 'perfect commonwealth'.

This line of interpretation seems to be validated by the parallel evolution of the senses of the term 'empire'. The word 'empire' is a notoriously elusive one, whose signification shifted constantly in relation to the different contexts in which it was employed, until it acquired its modern meaning in the eighteenth century. In the various humanistic discourses of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the term 'empire' was used interchangeably with the words 'state' and 'sovereignty'. In this sense, at the beginning, the term tended to reflect the transition of power from the medieval Roman Emperor to the modern sovereign ruler, according to the famous phrase 'rex imperator in regno suo': the powers which were recognized as belonging to the Emperor as the lord of all the world (*dominus mundi*) should be recognized as those of every free king within the limits of his own kingdom. As a variant of this first basic meaning, 'empire' could also be used to express the pattern of political relationships which held together groups of people in 'an extended system', a relationship which again incorporates the medieval conception of Empire as a sort of confederal structure of power. Such a relationship well described the so-called 'composite monarchies' of early-modern Europe and later, as a pertinent *ad hoc* example, also the relationship between Britain and her colonies.

A second alternative basic meaning of the term 'empire' carried a territorial dimension that is more directly linked to the idea of the Roman empire and was used to describe precisely the kind of political and cultural unity created out of a diversity of different states or peoples widely separated in space, namely a political whole often called 'extensive and detached empire'. Now all of these meanings were employed, sometimes in combination in the same context and in the same text, throughout the entire period of our discussion. Significantly enough, however, at the end of our conceptual story, coinciding with the mentioned great debate about empire of the eighteenth century, the term 'empire' became limited to the second major meaning. This development, entailing the demise of the first meaning, can be construed as the successful end of the early-

modern state-building in Europe. In other words, states having emerged, the term ‘empire’ lost its connection with that very process by which they built themselves and therefore came to be limited to the external dimension of state and politics only.

The eighteenth-century debate, by subjecting the Roman-Machiavellian vision of ‘empire’ to intense scrutiny and bringing about the relative change of paradigm, not only imparted a distinct novel importance to the imperial theme in its modern meaning, but, on a more permanent plane, raised arguments that were to change the whole course of European political thinking about empire and international order. And those arguments continue to have, though in radically transformed but still identifiable languages, a noticeable impact upon contemporary thinking about the same themes.¹

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Machiavelli is the key figure of our story. He engineered a conceptual system that proved to be ‘foundational’ in shaping the discourse about empire for almost three centuries, until late eighteenth century. In the *Prince* he revolutionised the whole tradition of humanist political thought by setting out the principles of a new political morality. While endorsing the conventional assumption that ‘virtue’ is the name of the moral qualities that enable a prince to ally with Fortune and acquire honour, glory and fame, he divorced the meaning of the term from any necessary connection with the orthodox Ciceronian system of princely virtues. He argued instead that a prince must ‘acquire the power to be not good’ and exercise it whenever this is dictated by necessity, in order to discharge what is his fundamental obligation of maintaining his state. His basic suggestion, developed in the course of chapter 15, is that those qualities which are considered good, but are nevertheless ruinous, do not deserve the name of virtues: they only ‘look like virtues’. Conversely, when their opposites are more likely to bring ‘safety and well-being’, he prefers to say that they ‘look like vices’. Thus, by redefining the pivotal concept of virtue, Machiavelli set out the terms of a new political morality, and not, as it is still widely held, the negation of all morality.² His moralistic conception of politics is further demonstrated by his commitment to republican liberty and the moral value of patriotism. These are the values that make up the basic conditions and characteristics of the optimum political order of the state.

Turning to the topic of empire, it must be stressed in the first place that Machiavelli established a close interrelationship between the good order of the ‘inside’ affairs of the state and that of the ‘outside’ affairs, or international politics. His basic contention was that the key to preserving ‘*virtù*’ and ‘liberty’ lay in a policy of expansion and conquest. Thus the foundation was laid of the so-called Machiavellian paradigm on empire, a triadic structure of thought destined to become a lasting tradition of discourse.

Machiavelli’s main concern in the *Discourses* was to explain why certain cities have ‘come to greatness’, and why the city of Rome in particular managed to attain ‘supreme greatness’ and to produce such ‘great results’. While reiterating the central arguments of the *Prince*, namely that the possession of virtue and liberty remains the key condition for the attainment of civic glory and greatness, in the *Discourses* he further developed his arguments by emphasizing the crucial importance of the proper political and constitutional arrangements. Such more permanent

¹ For a comprehensive overview and assessment of European thinking about empire in the early-modern period, see A. PAGDEN, *Lords of all the World. Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500 - c. 1800*, New Haven, Yale U. P., 1995, Introduction; D. ARMITAGE ed., *Theories of Empire, 1450-1800*, Aldershot 1998, Introduction; D. ARMITAGE, *Ideological Origins of the British Empire of the British Empire*, Cambridge 2000; R. TUCK, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and International Order from Grotius to Kant*, Oxford 1999. On the burgeoning field of historical studies about empire and its relevance on the present debate over the construction of a global polity, see Duncan S. A. BELL, “Dissolving Distance: Technology, Space and Empire in British Political Thought, 1770-1900”, in *The Journal of Modern History*, 77 (2003), especially pp. 523-530.

² On Machiavelli’s ‘new morality’, see the outstanding classic analysis of Quentin SKINNER in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge 1978, vol. I and in his *Machiavelli*, Oxford, Past Masters, 1981.

institutions - and not just the virtuous acts of a great prince - were necessary to achieve a lasting greatness. They should thus be designed to prevent corruption and postpone the inevitable final entropy of the 'body politic'. It is in the context of such a discussion that Machiavelli, moving decisively beyond the confines of the 'internal' dimension of politics, raised the theme of 'empire' and made it central to his vision of the perfect political order. After indicating the right institutions for ensuring 'virtue' in the conduct of the 'inside' affairs, Machiavelli stressed the point that it was no less essential to establish an additional set of institutions specially designed to keep up 'virtue' in the conduct of 'outside' affairs.

As Machiavelli saw it, the need for these additional laws arises from the fact that all republics and principalities exist in a state of hostile competition with each other. External conflict and insecurity emanate from human nature: men are never 'content to live on their own resources', and they are always 'inclined to try to govern others'. Another factor of conflict corresponds to a general condition of human affairs, namely the incessant flux of political life, in which everyone's fortunes always 'rise up or sink down' without being able to 'remain fixed'. Here is the famous passage: 'Since all human affairs are in motion and cannot remain fixed, they must needs rise up and sink down; to many things to which reason does not bring you, you are brought by necessity'. Given these basic presuppositions, the first and best maxim in foreign relations was to treat attack as the best form of defence and adopt a policy of expansion. A further implication was the idea that the pursuit of empire abroad was a precondition of virtue and liberty at home. Rome was again the perfect example for the entire argument: 'there has never been another republic so organized that she could gain as Rome did'. Rome developed the right institutions for expansion and conquest, hence the greatness of her empire.

There is no need to discuss in detail here the specific state policies that Machiavelli thought should be pursued for a successful warfare and expansion on the model provided by Rome's achievements. But among the policies he listed, there are for instance: the encouragement of immigration so as to have on hand the largest possible forces, the need to promote military virtue and instill the willingness to die for the glory and interest of one's *respublica*, and the danger and uselessness of mercenary and auxiliary troops. A characteristic feature of these policies - as of the whole list - was his emphasis on the crucial importance of *virtù*. This mattered more than anything else in military just as in civil affairs. In assessing enemies, Machiavelli thought they should be measured by their virtue not their wealth, since 'war is made with steel and not with gold'. In another application of the same point, he objected to relying too much on modern artillery rather on ancient virtue to win a battle. This aspect of Machiavelli's position is particularly significant for our purposes, because it was to become a major target of criticism in a later phase, especially when in the eighteenth century the importance of the economy in politics came to be recognized both by modernist and neo-Machiavellian political thinkers.

This is the Machiavellian 'ideology of empire'. Now we must consider some subordinate arguments concerning the best constitutional arrangements in relation to the 'outside' affairs. They are in fact a second set of options that the Florentine evokes and expressly turns down. They are nonetheless integral parts of the Machiavellian 'tradition of thought' that sustains the main axis of the discourse about empire in the early modern age. Even though they did not express Machiavelli's ideal solutions to exigent problems of empire, they are solutions that his critics would come to regard far more highly.

The first of these subordinate arguments consists in the so-called 'Rome-Sparta dilemma'.³ Machiavelli puts the dilemma in these terms: 'If anyone sets out, therefore, to organize a state from

³ The exposition of the dilemma occupied the central section of Book two of *The Discourses*, most centrally Chapter 6, entitled 'Whether it was possible to set up in Rome a Government that could take away the Enmity between the People and the Senate'. That topic in its turn was strictly related to the crucial question dealt with in Chapter 5, the title of which was, significantly: 'Where is the Guardianship of Liberty most securely placed, in the People or in the Great? And which has more Cause to raise a Riot, he who wishes to gain or he who wishes to keep?'. The dilemma, which is clearly posed and debated in chapter 5 according to

the beginning, he needs to examine whether he wishes to expand like Rome, in dominion and power, or whether it is to remain within narrow limits. In the first case, it is necessary to organize it like Rome and give scope to disturbances and discords among the inhabitants, as well as one can, because without a large number of men, and well armed, a republic never can grow larger, or, if it does grow larger, can never maintain itself. In the second, you can organize it like Sparta and like Venice. But because expansion is the poison of such republics, he who organizes them ought in all possible ways to prohibit their making conquests, because such conquests, based on a weak state, are its total ruin. So it happened to Sparta and to Venice’.

For Machiavelli the Sparta paradigm would be the best option only on an abstractly rational plane of thinking: ‘I am sure that the method for making a city that will last a long time is to organize her internally like Sparta or Venice, and to put her in a place naturally strong and so fortified that no one will believe he can quickly conquer her. Yet on the other hand she should not be so large as to give reason for fear to her neighbours. Thus she might enjoy her independence for a long time; for war is made on a city for two reasons: one, to become her master; the second, for fear she may conquer you. The method just mentioned almost entirely removes these two causes...Without doubt, I believe, if affairs could be kept balanced in this way, they would produce the true good government and the true calm of a city’.

The fundamental difficulty with this option is that the ‘balance’, or ‘middle way’, suggested by reason, is impossible to follow, because the affairs of the world are always in a constant flux: ‘since all human affairs are in motion and cannot remain fixed, they must needs rise up and sink down; to many things to which reason does not bring you, you are brought by necessity’, according to the famous passage already cited. The solution therefore lies in organizing cities like Rome, for purposes of expansion: ‘I believe the Roman method must be followed, and not that of the other states, because to find a course half-way between one and the other I believe not possible’.

A second theme which was to have a major impact on the Machiavellian tradition about empire concerned the classification that Machiavelli drew up of the different strategies of expansion that may be pursued by a republic. He set them out in the second Book of his *Discourses*, which is specifically focused on ‘what the Roman people did pertaining to the expansion of their empire’. Here are his basic assertions: ‘On studying ancient history, we learn that republics have used three methods for increasing their size. That followed by the ancient Tuscans was a league of several republics in which none went beyond any other in authority or in rank. As they conquered, they made the new states their companions, as the Swiss do now and as the Achaians and Aetolians did in ancient times in Greece’. The best method to be pursued, however, was the Roman one, consisting in surrounding oneself with allies, though keeping them in a subordinate position: ‘The second method is to get associates for yourself; not to such an extent, however, that you do not retain the position of command, the seat of authority and the fame of the enterprises – the method observed by the Romans’. Finally, Machiavelli mentioned a third method, which is ‘to get for yourself mere subjects and not associates, as the Spartans and the Athenians did’, a method he stated to be ‘totally ineffective’.⁴

The theme is particularly important as it involved the related question of the best method of government to adopt for empire. If Machiavelli remained obviously committed to the superiority of the Roman model, the model of the Tuscan federation of city states was discussed at some length and attracted a good deal of his admiration. He said: ‘The method of leagues earlier mentioned, according to which the Tuscans, the Achaians and the Aetholians lived, and according to which the Swiss live today, is after that of the Romans, the best. Though through it you cannot grow very great, two good things result: first, you do not easily draw wars down on yourself; second, all you

an exclusively internal approach, can only find its solution if the ‘external’ dimension is taken into consideration. The terms of the dilemma are therefore to be changed into one concerning the choice between a policy of expansion, as in the case of ancient Rome, or a policy of preservation, as in the case of Sparta.

⁴ See *Discourses*, B. I, Chap. 4, entitled ‘Republics have used three methods for increasing their Size’.

take, you keep easily'. As we shall see, the model of the equal leagues and of a federal type of government was in due course to figure prominently in the eighteenth-century debate on empire. Thus Machiavelli in his three *Discourses*, investigating widely and profoundly the civil and military affairs of the Roman republic, more specifically how Rome had 'come to greatness', set out the basic tenets of what was to become the Machiavellian tradition of thought. The theory of empire was to remain a central component of that tradition.

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Before we deal with the epochal shift of conceptions about empire which took place in the eighteenth century, it is appropriate to sketch the main developments that affected the imperial theme from Machiavelli's own time to the early Enlightenment, so that we may better understand the "great debate" of the eighteenth century. To this effect I have already stressed the point that ideas about empire are part of wider political perspectives. In particular the conceptual constellation which constituted the Machiavellian paradigm of empire was under the gravitational pull of the civic humanism and classical republicanism of the early Renaissance. This means that all changes affecting the core values of this tradition are bound to affect the relating conception of empire.

Between the foundational moment, represented by Machiavelli himself, and the final moment when the new paradigm of the 'empire of commerce' prevailed, there was a sort of 'interlude', from late Renaissance to the late seventeenth century after the Glorious Revolution in England. Historians of political theory have depicted that interlude as dominated by the culture of scepticism and reason of state, which was characteristic of the 'new humanism' of the late sixteenth century. Then – the story continues – out of a profound sympathy with that sceptical political culture, there arose the 'modern' school of natural law with its characteristic 'ethical minimalism'. More specifically, there was a shift from the ethics of 'the good' to the ethics of 'rights'. In such a context the Machiavellian ideology of empire entered a long phase of eclipse. The eclipse was the corollary of the radical critique to which the ethic of civic virtue and patriotism, the very heart of that ideology, was subjected.

Lipsius and the "reason of state" theorists were the first to repudiate the equation of liberty and greatness by producing a comprehensive analysis of the *grandezza* of the Roman empire in a manner deliberately opposed to the traditional humanist accounts.⁵ Lipsius argued that the greatness of the Roman empire depended on four things: the size of its population, its effective organisation of taxation, its impressive public buildings and its disciplined citizenry. Civic and military virtue were largely irrelevant as a factors producing greatness. The key to success was a tightly organised army, mostly a standing army drawn from citizens of the country. It was not then an army of foreign mercenaries of the kind denounced by earlier humanists, but it was not a true citizen militia either. An additional element was Lipsius' realistic emphasis on the importance of money to a nation's greatness.

Reinterpreted in the light of a Tacitist vision of politics, the humanist ethic of empire underwent a profound change of rationale. Deliberately reversing Machiavelli's order of preference, Lipsius puts the self-preservation of states before conquest and empire, although he conceived of 'empire' as the best solution to the problem of civil and religious strife. Correspondingly the Roman empire became for him the model of a new kind of imperialism, aimed at the reconstruction of security and peace in a Europe riven by civil wars. His position on empire was set out clearly in the last words of his *De Magnitudine Romana*: "Europe is racked by constant wars and rebellions. Why? Because kingdoms or dynasties are of such small extent, and always have a reason to fear or expect

⁵ Lipsius wrote three related works on the theme of Roman empire: *De militia Romana* (1585-6) on the Roman army's organisation and tactics, *Polioreticon* (1596) on its fortifications and technology, and *Admiranda sive De magnitudine Romana* (1598) on the general sources of its greatness. For an analysis of Lipsius' arguments, including a useful short account of the views of the reason-of-state writers, see R. TUCK, *Philosophy and Government*, cit., Chap. 3, especially pp. 65-82.

something of their neighbours, to demand something of them or to punish them. The same was true before the Roman empire...I believe that one head would be an effective force for religious unity, for the well-being of all its subjects, and for the struggle against the common enemy, the Turks". The quotation, while adumbrating the essence of his doctrinal perspective, revealed too his overriding concern for the contemporary problems of Europe. It is worth reminding that the plea for European unity against the Turks was frequently made in these years, as the Habsburgs mobilised extensive forces for a fifteen-year war against the Ottoman empire, from 1591 to 1606. Lipsius was not alone.

Giovanni Botero was the Piedmontese ex-Jesuit whose *Della Ragione di Stato* gave its name to a new genre of political writing, the so-called 'reason of state' literature that in the early seventeenth century became particularly associated with the Counter-Reformation movement. His Catholicism meant that, though he shared with Lipsius' the Tacitism of the neo-humanist approach, he insisted that the *ragion di stato* techniques should be practised for two related goals, first for the security of Christianity as a whole against the Turks, second in order to re-establish the unity of Europe under the hegemony of the Catholic Church. On empire he was emphatic: "I reckon that the human race would live best if the whole world were put under a single Prince...For the majority of our afflictions comes from the multiplicity of princes". In practice, he was thinking of the Spanish empire for the role of 'Universal Monarchy'.⁶

Apart though from the pro-Catholic aspect of his stance, Botero expressed the same attitude towards the Machiavellian paradigm as expressed by Lipsius. He put preservation ('*il conservare*') before conquest ('*l'aggrandire*'), but, at the same time, for him 'empire' remained fundamental as an instrument of security. An essential element of his critique of Machiavelli was also his rejection of the Roman model and a decided preference for a medieval style 'Universal Monarchy'. We have here an interesting combination of the modern Tacitist discourse about empire with the revival of the old pre-modern idiom of empire, expressing the aspiration to a supra-national authority. The dominant strand is clearly the humanist one, while the medievalist revival of the *monarchia universalis* was a subordinate part of the argument, dictated by the application of theory to the historical circumstances.⁷

Botero's lead in combining 'reason of state' and Catholic universalism under Spanish supremacy was quickly followed by other pamphleteers situated like him in the Italian principalities allied to Spain. Among these the most famous were the author of *Civitas Solis* Tommaso Campanella, Scipione Ammirato and Virgilio Malvezzi. All the authors combined, like Botero, a conception of empire resulting from the combination of two very different languages of empire: the medieval one of "universal monarchy" (*dominium totius mundi*) and the neo-humanist language of reason-of-state theory - the latter language probably being used to redescribe in more obviously modern terms an archaic conception which had served the interests of archaic dynasties. This literature, not surprisingly, attracted the derisory rejection by the English, Dutch and French writers engaged in denying the legitimacy of Spanish imperialism both in America and in Europe. Moreover, the Spanish-Catholic connotation of that literature left a permanent mark on the subsequent debate, in

⁶ Botero made this point in an undated *Discorso dell'ecellenza delle monarchie*, published by someone else in 1607 (the quotation is drawn from R. TUCK, *ibidem*, p. 67).

⁷ In principle Botero was consistently opposed both to a policy of expansion and to the idea of a 'Universal Monarchy'. With regard to the latter, we find critical remarks focused on the difficulty of governing over-extensive political bodies. He used the analogy of human bodies in which, due to the distance of the organs, the heart could not infuse its virtue. Then he wrote: "E gli Stati di gran dominio non si mantengono longamente, perché alle volte il prencipe non ha tanta prudenza che possa antivedere tutti gli inconvenienti e provvedere ai disordini che in un grande imperio sono necessariamente d'ogni sorte, molte e grandi". His conclusion was: "Gli stati mezzani di potere, mentre stanno entro i termini della mediocrità, sono asai sicuri; ma se niente vogliono allargarsi, perdono insieme la mediocrità e la sicurezza". The passage is drawn from *Del dispregio del mondo*, 1584, L. II, anteriore alla *Ragione di Stato*, where Botero openly advises princes not pursue a policy of expansion. For a comprehensive analysis of the Italian 'reason of state' literature, the following article remains especially valuable: R. DE MATTEI, "Il mito della Monarchia Universale nel pensiero politico italiano del Seicento", in *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, XXXII (1965), pp. 531-550.

the sense that the eighteenth-century opponents of empire pursued the strategy of suggesting that all theoreticians of empire were, by implication, advocates of anti-historical regressive dreams. This certainly explains the numerous tracts containing the term “universal monarchy” in their titles - a term of condemnation generally applied to French kings branded as over-ambitious warmongers seeking universal monarchy.

Finally, as to Hobbes, the father of modern political theory, his attitude on the issue of empire was fundamentally in line with the neo-humanist orientation. He was strongly against wars of aggression or aggrandizement. “For such commonwealths, or such monarchs, as affect war for itself, that is to say, out of ambition, or of vainglory, or that make account to revenge every little injury, or disgrace done by their neighbours, if they ruin not themselves, their fortune must be better than they have reason to expect” (*Elements of Law*, II. ix. 9). Noting that Athens and Rome sometimes grew rich from foreign conquests, he commented: “But we should not take enrichment by these means into our calculation. For as means of gain, military activity is like gambling; in most cases it reduces a person’s property; very few succeed” (*De cive*, XIII. 14). And in *Leviathan* he includes in his list of the ‘diseases’ of a commonwealth “the insatiable appetite, or *Bulimia*, of enlarging Dominion; with the incurable *Wounds* thereby many times received from the enemy; and the *Wens*, of ununited conquests, which are many times a burthen, and with lesse danger lost, than kept” (*Leviathan*, chap. XXIX).

With regard to the question of how colonization could be justified, Hobbes rejected the neo-Aristotelian argument, which portrayed the native people of America as ‘natural slaves’. In his view, colonization was a permissible way of employing people who could not otherwise be supported by the economy of the mother-country; but the colonists were under a moral obligation to treat the native people humanely, and to encourage them to use greater productivity to compensate for the loss of territory. Hobbes was far from being an enthusiastic proto-imperialist, as he is so frequently portrayed by specialists in international relations theory. The urge for power in human psychology (‘a perpetuall and restless desire of Power after power, that ceases only in Death’, *Leviathan*, chap. XI) cannot be interpreted as an endorsement of wars of expansion, the concept of power in his argument being purely instrumental. Self-preservation remains the basic justificatory principle of behaviour in the relations between states.⁸

Although the critique of Machiavelli’s tradition developed in the ‘interlude’ period derived its inspiration from a political culture of crisis and because of this had a fundamentally negative character, it certainly prepared the ground for new doctrinal developments, with particular regard to the theme of territorial over-extension which was to become central in the eighteenth century debate.

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The age of Enlightenment marked the emergence of a radically new paradigm of empire: the ‘empire of commerce’. This is essentially the result of a larger transformation of political science, which involved not only an entirely novel language of politics but also a novel ideology. In fact, what we have described so far is the crisis of the Machiavellian model of empire, a crisis stemming from the new humanism of late Renaissance. The reversal of Machiavelli’s dilemma, from a policy of expansion to a policy of preservation, was the effect of a purely negative argument. As a consequence, the Roman model had remained in a great measure archetypal, though in a negative manner. Sometimes, as in Hobbes’s case, it definitely lost any relevance.

Things were to change fundamentally when the modern categories of ‘civil society’, ‘philosophic history of civil society’, ‘spirit’ of the laws, or of the ‘order of things’, and ‘civilization’ became the

⁸ For a comprehensive accurate survey of Hobbes’s views about international relations, especially directed against the misrepresentations put forward by modern international relations theorists, who, in particular, usually tend to portray him as an archetypal proponent of imperialism, see N. MALCOLM, “Hobbes’s Theory of International Relations”, in ID., *Aspects of Hobbes*, Oxford 2002, pp. 432-456.

staple keywords of political science, many derived from Montesquieu. This was a conscious recognition of the economic and social foundations of politics and of their being subject to historical change. In particular, the language of ‘political economy’ became an essential component of political discourse. This implied the recognition that economy had its own rules and political prudence could not be detached from economic prudence. In David’s Hume famous words, ‘commerce’ had become, for the first time, ‘an affair of state’.⁹

On the ideological plane, the language of ‘political economy’ came to challenge the discourse of ‘civic humanism’ and thus give rise to an alternative political ethic, centred on the ideal of ‘modern civility’ or ‘modern politeness’. There was a linguistic shift from the ideology of civic virtue to an ideology of ‘manners’. Commerce acted as the civilizing agency. ‘Politeness’ favoured human ‘sociability’ and brought its own kind of liberty and virtue. Liberty and virtue might even cease to be political concepts and the cultivated personality might come to take precedence over the political capacity of the virtuous man (the *zoon politikon*). ‘Civil liberty’, in the form of a regular system of justice, was more fundamental to a modern commercial society than ‘political liberty’. The role of government was the effective administration of interests: against the assumptions of civic humanism, politics was now a matter of keeping the machine going rather a theatre for displaying virtue and honour.¹⁰

In the domain of the international politics, the dialectic between the republican virtue and commerce manifested itself in the form of different conceptions of war. Whereas the advocates of ancient virtue assigned an ethical function to war, the modernist ideologists thought that the warlike ethos was historically obsolete. Ancient politics was warlike because it was economically primitive, and because it lacked a sociable code of manners. In the context of modern civilization commerce had become the determining factor. New productive market economy had altered fundamentally the working of the system, creating complex ties of interdependence, both economic and cultural, between nations, thus reducing the role of war. Commerce was also crucial in disseminating the new ethos and in imparting a peaceable character to international politics. This was the force of the argument inaugurated by Montesquieu about *la douceur du commerce*, about commerce softening manners and uniting nations.¹¹

The same argument also found exemplary treatment in Hume’s essay ‘Of commerce’. ‘The greatness of a state, and the happiness of its subjects, how independent soever they may be supposed in some respects, are commonly allowed to be inseparable with regard to commerce; and as private men receive greater security, in the possession of their trade and riches, from the power of the public, so the public becomes powerful in proportion to the opulence and extensive commerce of private men’. In addition to the peaceable character of manners, Hume here further developed the theme so as to include ‘wealth’ and ‘public happiness’ as two cardinal effects of commerce. Thus power became a function of wealth, as against the old republican assumption that it was predominantly a function of civic virtue. In fact, changes in the nature of war had enormously increased the ‘expence of defence’, and only large commercial nations could generate the necessary wealth to maintain armies. Another important point was the new idea of ‘public happiness’ as a central value, again in clear opposition to the ethic of civic virtue.¹²

⁹ D. HUME, “Of Civil Liberty” (1741) in *Political Essays*, ed. K. HAAKONSSSEN, Cambridge U.P.1994, pp. 51-52. For a general interpretation of Hume’s political thought, see K. HAAKONSEN, “The structure of Hume’s political thought”, in D. FATE NORTON, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Cambridge 1993.

¹⁰ For an in depth analysis of the republican-modernist debate, see the classic study of J.G.A. POCOOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment: Political Thought and the Atlantic Tradition*, Princeton 1975.

¹¹ See MONTESQUIEU, *De l’Esprit des Lois*, Genève 1748, Book XX, chap. I-II. For a general interpretation of Montesquieu’s political thought, see J.N. SHKLAR, *Montesquieu*, Oxford 1987 (Past Masters).

¹² See D. HUME, “Of Commerce”, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-100. A systematic treatment of the topic of the cost of war, in the context of modern commercial society and of the changes in the art of war, is given in Adam SMITH, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book V, Chap. I, Part I, entitled “Of the Expence of Defence”. In this context Smith dealt with the highly controversial theme of the “standing army” vs. the “militia”. Against the republican rhetoric of a citizen army, he spoke

The repudiation of the Roman archetype of an empire, based on military conquest and territorial domination, was a central feature of the new paradigm. The point was clearly a necessary corollary of the ethic of 'sociability', adopted as an ideological option, but it was also the effect of a strictly intellectual presupposition, namely of a new mode of understanding history. From the traditional cyclical view of history there was a shift towards a new unilinear conception of historical change. Theories of progress replaced theories of *anakuklosis*. Thus for modernist thinkers, because of the structural historical changes which constituted the commercial system and which generated new systems of manners, antiquity ceased to have prescriptive force. Correspondingly, the Roman empire ceased to be a model of 'greatness' to be copied - and this in all respects, from liberty and civic virtue to imperial greatness. It maintained its paradigmatic relevance only as a case study that could help to arrive at some general truths about politics. In particular, the history of Rome was especially relevant in respect of the theme of empire.

In his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), a typical work of philosophical history, Montesquieu discussed the issue by emphasizing the determining influence of the spirit of the people, that is of their enduringly warlike character. The one aim of the Roman government, whatever its form, was territorial aggrandizement. Whether it was a republic with a citizen army or an empire with an army of foreign mercenaries, a bellicose spirit and the exigencies of military expansion dominated its politics. But, paradoxically, military success, the cause of Rome's greatness, became the source of its downfall. Through renewed military ventures and success, Rome expanded beyond its ability to govern itself. The vast expansion of the territory under its control and the remoteness of the fields of battle kept the army too far from the city for too long. The soldiers came to depend more on their local generals than upon the home government, and the commanders acquired inordinate power as a result.

As a further consequence of territorial over-extension, the republican regime underwent profound transformations and freedom tended to become politically impossible. The policy of extending Roman citizenship to all the Italian allies implied that so large a population could not be self-governing in the old civic manner, and citizenship lost its emotional meaning. It had been a strength of the Romans that they freely adopted any custom of a conquered people that seemed useful to them. This flexibility became a great weakness when the soldiers in outlying districts took on local customs that estranged them from the metropolis. The political power of disloyal soldiers and commanders, who made and unmade the emperors, increased and enfeebled the Empire. Thus the Empire became an insecure military regime, and when it allowed itself to be attacked by several armies at the same time, in spite of military heroism, it perished.

Montesquieu also addressed the question of universal monarchy in a variation on the theme of empire that was traditionally evoked by the rivalry between the Habsburg and Bourbon dynasties for supremacy in Europe. In fact, the author intended to settle his accounts with the imperial policies pursued by Louis XVI. He did this in the *Réflexions sur la Monarchie Universelle en Europe* of 1734, a work that he no sooner published than he withdrew. The main point was that a universal monarchy such as the Romans had possessed was, in the present state of Europe, impossible. To a considerable degree it was a matter of geography. Europe did not have the great enclosed plains found in Asia; it was naturally divided into states of smaller extent, inimical to the establishment of the autocratic despotisms required by great empires. Europe was also *une grande République*, a nation composed of many nations, each of which possessed a spirit of liberty which defied conquest, and between which the speedy communication of new ideas ensured an equalisation of military force. In modern Europe, moreover, power was intimately connected to commerce. But since success in commerce could never be permanent, because of the objective mechanism of prices, no state could be assured of pre-eminence for long. For all these reasons Louis XIV, so many times accused of seeking universal monarchy, could never have become the sole king of Europe.

of the necessity of a well-regulated standing army and proved that the republican dislike of it as dangerous to constitutional freedom was groundless (on the subject see also Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, "Of Arms").

In both works we have examined so far, Montesquieu clearly emphasized the central importance of territorial extent as a key political variable. In fact, the analysis of politics on the basis of extent turned out to be one of the leading themes of his chief work, the *Esprit des Lois*. Questions of scale, and of the form of government appropriate to different extents of territory, were central to his distinction of monarchy from despotism on the one hand, and from republics on the other. Despotisms were characteristically large empires, which were held together by arbitrary rule. But since the conditions for such large empires only existed in Asia, the implication of his analysis was that the monarchies of modern Europe were to remain quite different in nature. Their territory was moderately large and their rule was characterized by ‘moderation’.¹³ As regards the republics, their form of government was suited only to small territories. But republics might overcome the limitations of small extent by forming confederations, the so-called *républiques fédératives*.¹⁴ The conclusion was the same he had reached in the *Réflexions*: a single empire in Europe had become impossible and was also undesirable.

If Montesquieu unequivocally rejected the Roman model of empire, territorial and based on military conquest, as totally unsuited to the conditions of modern Europe, he believed that overseas empires were all that remained possible and rational in the context of ‘modern civility’. His view was that the English had created in North America a uniquely successful empire for commerce, successful in combining the spirit of liberty with the pursuit of commerce. As an island, England had avoided conquests, but carefully regulated its commerce to ensure that it was to its advantage. Where it established colonies, it had done so to extend its commerce not its domination, and it had accorded them the form of government much like its own. England’s empire was an empire of the sea, not of the land: as such it could attract the friendship of its neighbours and exert a beneficial, moderating influence on the affairs of Europe, by contributing to its liberties.¹⁵

An important point of the whole argument about the ‘empire of commerce’ was that Montesquieu justified the imposition of order on navigation by way of monopolies. He clearly regarded such a policy as quite compatible with the ‘sweet manners’ of commerce - an attitude arguably based on the optimistic assumption that commerce had definitely freed the modern world of the aggressive values of the past.¹⁶ Such an assumption was not shared by Hume, as we shall see, and the discontents that culminated in the American revolution were bound to put it in serious doubt.

We have already pointed out the fundamentals of Hume’s modernist perspective on politics and international order. Focusing on his analyses specifically concerning the theme of empire, it is perhaps appropriate to start from his general judgement of Machiavelli: ‘Machiavel was certainly a great genius; but having confined his study to the furious and tyrannical governments of ancient times, or to the little principalities of Italy, his reasonings, especially upon monarchical government, have been found extremely defective; and there scarcely is any maxim in his *prince*, which subsequent experience has not entirely refuted...I mention this, among many instances of the errors of that politician, proceeding, in a great measure, from his having lived in too early an age of the world, to be a good judge of political truth...Trade was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century; and there scarcely is any ancient writer on politics, who has made mention of it’.¹⁷ These remarks on Machiavelli not only synthesize Hume’s general outlook, but can be taken to imply the rejection of antiquity and the Roman model of empire, all this in the name of ‘commerce’ defined as ‘the new reason of state’.

Hume’s alternative vision of international order is best expressed in his famous essay ‘Of the Balance of Power’, the principle named in the title presupposing a multcentred world of smaller states and as such the opposite extreme of the Roman idea of empire, or of ‘universal monarchy’.

¹³ See MONTESQUIEU, *Esprit des Lois*, Book VIII, Chaps. xvii-xxi; B. IX, ix-x, xvi; B. XI, xix; B. XVII, iii-iv.

¹⁴ ID., *Esprit des Lois*, Book IX, i-iii.

¹⁵ ID., *Esprit des Lois*, Book XIX, Chap. xxvii; B. XX, Chap. vii, xii.

¹⁶ ID., *Esprit des Lois*, Book XXI, Chaps. xx-xxi.

¹⁷ HUME, *Political Essays*, cit., “Of Civil Liberty”, pp. 51-52.

The topic is dealt with in the usual manner of comparing the relative merits of the ancient and the modern world. While recognizing that the ancients had not been entirely ignorant of the principle, especially at the time of the Greek republics, he pointed out that “the *balance of power* is a secret in politics, fully known only at present”. In this sense he could emphatically present the new principle of balance as an exemplary expression of the “great changes for the better” of modern politics.

Most significantly, Hume set about to provide an express repudiation of the Roman paradigm of empire in the final part of the essay, in the form of an argument in support of the balance of power as the foundational principle of modern international order. Here the philosopher set forth the thesis that ‘enormous monarchies’ are bound to suffer a rapid downfall, as the inevitable effect of territorial extent. The radical loss of martial spirit, a loss essentially attributed to the operation of human psychology in conditions of success, and the consequent resort to mercenary arms are the determining factors of degeneration and fall. The cycle of success, excess and dissolution is assimilated to a sort of iron law of history, paradigmatically proved by the history of the Roman empire: “The melancholy fate of the Roman emperors, from the same cause, is renewed over and over again, till the final dissolution of the monarchy”. These were the final lines of the essay.¹⁸

A striking similarity of approach can certainly be discerned between Montesquieu and Hume regarding the theme of universal monarchy and empire. They had both a highly favourable view of the English type of empire and, on the theoretical plane, were inclined to think that the polarity between empires for conquest and empires for trade was the foundation of a credible theory of international relations in the modern world. In this regard, however, Hume’s standpoint differed from Montesquieu. He did not share the Frenchman’s sanguine view of commercial empire as a source of peace and justice between nations. The crucial point of contrast was the issue of colonial monopolies. These, as we have already noticed, were approved of by Montesquieu.

In his discussion of the issue in his ‘Of the jealousy of trade’, an essay that Hume added to his collection of essays in 1758, Hume revealed his ambivalence as to monopolies in assessing the impact of the ‘jealousy of trade’. On one hand he acknowledged, on the basis of economic arguments, that emulation between nations and variety in the manufactures of each was the way to keep industry alive in all of them: “Not only as a man, but as a British subject, I pray for the flourishing commerce of Germany, Spain, Italy, and even France itself. I am at least certain, that Great Britain, and all those nations, would flourish more, did their sovereigns and ministers adopt such enlarged and benevolent sentiments towards each other”. On the other hand, Hume intended his arguments, as his contemporary readers realised, to be a wholesale critique of the prevailing English approach to commercial empire, an approach seeking to impose a trading monopoly in the American colonies, thus creating another system of oppression and dependence.

Moreover, as we learn from his *Letters*, in the last years of his life, Hume came to believe that such a monopoly could only be achieved by a war of conquest. In this way the colonial empire would finally become territorial, and the free government of Britain would behave as oppressively as that of ancient republican Rome. In criticizing the Whig idea of commercial empire, Hume seems to have been aware of the imminent prospect of a war against the American colonies.¹⁹

If we transfer on the theoretical plane his late life political concerns, we could say that Hume came to put in doubt the very concept of the ‘empire of commerce’ from the point of view both of

¹⁸ HUME, *op. cit.*, “Of the Balance of Power”, pp. 154-160.

¹⁹ HUME, *op. cit.*, ‘Of the Jealousy of Trade’, pp. 150-153. On the conflict between Hume’s and Montesquieu’s arguments, see P. CHAMLEY, “The Conflict between Montesquieu and Hume. A Study of the Origins of Adam Smith’s Universalism”, in A.S. SKINNER-T. WILSON (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith*, Oxford 1975, pp. 300-305. For an interpretation of Hume’s doubts and ambivalences on the basis of his personal correspondence, see J. ROBERTSON, “Universal monarchy and the liberties of Europe: David Hume’s critique of an English Whig doctrine”, in N. PHILLIPSON-Q. SKINNER (eds.), *Political Discourse in Early-Modern Britain*, Cambridge 1993, especially pp. 349-373. On Hume’s position with regard to the issue of the American colonies, see J.G.A. POCOCK, “Hume and the American Revolution: the Dying Thoughts of a North Briton”, in *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, Cambridge 1985. It is worth reminding here that Hume’s arguments about the British commercial empire were welcomed and carried on by Adam Smith (*Wealth of Nations*) and Edward Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*).

its practicality and its benign character. More generally, the 'jealousy of trade' mechanism might operate in a perverse way so as to seriously undermine the peaceable character of international political order normally engendered by 'commerce'. If this interpretation is correct, Hume's prayer for the flourishing commerce of all the nations of Europe is to be interpreted as no more than the expression of a noble ideal, about which he was becoming more and more sceptical.

In the light of these considerations, and in spite of Hume's later ambivalence (which was not anyway in the original edition of his *Political Essays*), the two authors remain the key figures in respect of the modernist paradigm of the 'empire of commerce'. We can therefore conclude by stressing the point that within the liberal 'modernist' mainstream we are faced with two different conceptions of the 'empire of commerce', one based on monopoly of trade, the other committed to free trade.

The difference, though rooted in a shared basic vision of politics, is clear and significant. First in relation to the general character of international order in the context of modern civilization, Montesquieu's equation of 'commerce' with '*moeurs douces*' is definitely not so clearcut in Hume. Second there was the question as to whether the superior economic advantage and power of the centre, which were characteristic of any empire, were compatible with 'liberty' and peaceful 'modern sociability'. For Montesquieu such a compatibility was clearly a credible assumption. For his part, Hume did not really answer the question, let alone provide an antidote to the evils he saw as arising from central control.

So much for the modernist version of the new paradigm of the 'commercial empire'. As anticipated in the introduction, there was also a republican 'neo-Machiavellian' version of the same paradigm. As we have likewise already pointed out, the 'great debate' involved the fundamental opposition between the ideology of 'modern civility' and the ideology of 'civic humanism'. After the long eclipse of the Machiavellian tradition, from the new humanism of late Renaissance to the 'minimalism' of modern natural law thinkers, in second half of seventeenth-century Britain there was a powerful revival of republican and Machiavellian ideas. The movement was initiated by James Harrington (*Oceana*, 1656) and Algernon Sidney (*Discourses upon Government*, 1679), who found convenient to apply to the problems of the English environment, in the period between the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution, the republican tradition of thought. Such a revival was characterized at first by a strict conformity to the tradition in its classical purity, in perfect continuity with the Machiavellian legacy.

At a later period, in the Augustan half century following the Revolution of 1688, the language of civic virtue, which was mobilized in support of the Country party against the Court party, became fully operative in British politics, giving rise in the process to complex conceptual rearrangements of the original Machiavellian legacy. It is in this context that a distinctive strand of thought emerged which is usually defined as 'neo-Machiavellian'. Now, with specific regard to the theme of empire, we shall focus on two intellectual figures that played a crucial role both in developing the new concept of 'empire of commerce' and in imparting to it a distinctly neo-Machiavellian bent. They are Charles Davenant and Andrew Fletcher.

Their contribution consisted, basically, in remodelling the language of 'republican humanism', so as to adapt it to the modern language of 'political economy' and also to the new epistemology of 'philosophical history'. Though sharing the same basic vision of politics and the same ideology, the two key figures held rather different views about the 'empire of commerce'. Davenant is the more worth concentrating on because his approach is more relevant to the general debate. He stands out in his attempt to combine the republican ideology with modern commercial *realpolitik*: and it is

significant that Hume, in writing his essay on the ‘jealousy of trade’, had certainly in mind not only Montesquieu, but also Davenant’s competing view of the same phenomenon.²⁰

Davenant’s structure of argument about empire was based on the cardinal concepts of the Machiavellian paradigm, which, while reasserted in its letter and spirit, was also subjected to a radical revision of sense. The revision consisted first of all in the recognition of the imperative centrality of ‘commerce’ in modern politics and in ‘modern political prudence’. ‘Commerce’ had to be treated as a ‘matter of state’, not simply as a ‘conveniency or accidental ornament to glory and greatness’, as it was the case according to the moralistic ideology of ancient public virtue. In the condition of the modern world, trade had become the new way to achieve ‘glory and dominion’ and preserve ‘public virtue’. Thus, through the incorporation of ‘commerce’ into the definition of ‘public virtue’, Davenant was led to repudiate the Roman model of empire and put forward the new model of the ‘empire of commerce’. A model - it is important to stress - drawing its basic inspiration from the Machiavellian tradition and therefore deeply opposed to the modernist conception of empire, expressed by the same concept. England’s empire was one of commerce and as such capable of combining virtue and liberty with greatness and power. London, as the emporium of the world, had become the new Rome. This formula sums up Davenant’s stance in a most emblematic way.

More specifically, Davenant’s reflections upon empire and commerce stood in a close relation to those typical of the Machiavellian paradigm, whose foundational presupposition consisted in the equation ‘civic virtue’-‘empire’. In other words, the preservation of internal perfection of the state required the pursuit of conquest and empire. Davenant maintained the equation, but considered the Roman model – identified in the form of the Spanish and French aspiration to re-create a modern ‘universal monarchy’- as dysfunctional to the supreme values of virtue and liberty. A universal monarchy would spread a uniform tyranny over all its provinces and, far from promoting peace, as some apologists pretended, it would be the source of wars and devastations.²¹

A further fundamental inconvenience, rendering territorial empires incompatible with ‘public virtue’, was their inevitable ‘corruption’ and final ruin. The design of good governments “for any duration” was a key project of Machiavelli’s *Discourses* and Davenant, as a faithful Machiavellian, set out to render the problem consonantly with his own Machiavellianism. States had an inevitable tendency to expand in order to build an empire. At first this was a natural and desirable process, but at a certain point the healthy growth transformed itself into a corruption of the very principles on which the empire had been founded. The key factor of corruption usually manifested itself in the over-extension of empire. The original polity, being now the centre of empire, acted as a magnet of wealth and power, thus engendering a process of relentless corruption of its manners, from luxury to vice and effeminacy. Internally effeminacy arrested the domestic production of wealth. Externally an effeminate rich nation was doomed to become prey to foreign military invasion.²²

²⁰ On the intellectual significance of Davenant (1656-1714) and Fletcher in the British political culture, see J.G.A. POCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment, cit.*, chap. 13, pp. 423-46 and I. HONT, “Free trade and the economic limits to national politics: neo-Machiavellian political economy reconsidered”, in J. DUNN (ed.), *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 41-120. For a rigorous discussion of the same themes, see also P. N. MILLER, *Defining the Common Good. Empire religion and philosophy on eighteenth-century Britain*, Cambridge 1994, Chap. 3, especially pp. 150-194.

²¹ For Davenant’s reflections on empire, see especially “An Essay upon Universal Monarchy”, *Essays upon I. The Balance of Power, II The Right of Making War, Peace and Alliances, III, Universal Monarchy* (1701), and *Essays upon Peace at Home and War Abroad*, in *The Political and Commercial Works of Charles Davenant*, collected and revised by Sir Charles Whitworth, 5 vols. 1771, vol. IV. Other significant essays are *An Essay upon Ways and Means of Supplying the War* (1695), in *Works, cit.*, vol. I; *An Essay upon the Probable Methods of making a People Gainers in the Balance of Trade* (1699), in *Works, cit.*, vol. II.

²² On the constitutive role played by the ‘politics of extent’ in the evolution of the republican conception of politics, see J.G.A. *The Politics of Extent and the Problems of Freedom: The William Jovanovich Lecture at Colorado College, October 14, 1987*, Colorado Springs, 1987.

Bearing in mind Machiavelli's original scheme of thought concerning empire, namely his basic dilemma between empires for expansion and for preservation, Davenant's preference was expressly for empires of preservation, but in doing so he did not adopt as his model empires those which Machiavelli had criticized, Sparta and Venice. Distinguishing sharply between ancient and modern prudence, he thought that in modern Europe the call of ancient virtue, especially Sparta's ideology of simplicity, could no longer be followed. Instead, he argued that an empire for preservation in the modern world could, and indeed should, aspire to be a commercial empire on a global scale. As we have already pointed out, commerce had become the new 'reason of state' and the new way to 'glory and dominion'. Consequently, England, as a free government, pursuing commerce not territory, provided the best example of a modern empire for preservation.

Especially significant in Davenant's perspective is his position on a crucial *topos* of the Anglo-British debate on empire - the question as to the role of the centre in respect of its dependencies. Commerce, Davenant argued, was most beneficial, when least impeded. But his commitment to free trade was qualified in a crucial respect: it was reasonable for a superior kingdom to expect that its provinces, however they might enrich themselves, would not do so at the expense the centre. Moreover, although an empire of commerce was an empire for preservation rather than increase, this clearly did not mean that it should have no provinces, or that it should abdicate its sovereign authority over them. In Davenant's words: 'Where the seat of dominium is a great emporium, such a city will not only be the head of power but of Trade'.

Another point, an intensely Machiavellian one, anticipated Hume's 'jealousy of trade' theme. Only by becoming a great commercial empire, Davenant argued, could England resist and frustrate the French ambition to re-create a modern universal monarchy. To this end England should be prepared to show its military 'virtue', literally a ruthless 'jealousy of state', which was the equivalent of Machiavelli's competitive 'virtue'.

The last two features of Davenant's standpoint are particularly important as they reveal a sharp contrast of opinion within the neo-Machiavellian perspective itself. In fact, Andrew Fletcher, although sharing Davenant's republican vision of politics, and sharing also his views about the novel importance of commerce in public affairs, came to differ sharply in his evaluation of the threat of universal monarchy, with reference both to its source and to the antidote. Fletcher's position was based on the conviction that William III was as dangerous and ambitious as Louis XIV, since he imputed to him the plan to incorporate the Netherlands, thus obtaining for ever "the empire of the sea, with an entire monopoly of trade". The implication is that for Fletcher the pursuit of 'universal monarchy' had ceased to be associated with monarchical absolutism, and had become one of the insatiable demands of the metropolitan emporium. 'London was the new Rome', a formula again emblematic, but this time in a pejorative sense, in order to emphasize Fletcher's distance from Davenant. Correspondingly, all this implies that Fletcher came to reject Davenant's distinction-opposition between 'empire of commerce' and 'universal monarchy'.

Fletcher's problem in looking for a remedy to the malady of commercial rivalry was to identify a form of government that would make commerce produce its beneficial effects without reinforcing the predominance of the centre. So he came to envisage a remodelling of the entire pattern of government in Europe, thinking it best that it be divided into political communities roughly equal in size and grouped into a smaller number of leagues or unions. In other words, he imagined a world of multiple union of unions. Since these would be incapable of conquest, if not of war altogether, the identification of the 'interest' of a nation with its 'advantage' over another would be broken. As a result interest and justice would be one. This side of the argument corresponded to the repudiation of Davenant's 'jealousy of state' and the transformation of older notions of national interest in the interest of the international community, or the general interest of mankind.

Fletcher broke radically with the assumptions of Machiavellian politics, with their focus on national greatness and with their commitment to civic virtue as instrument of imperial expansion. In a trading world, what was needed was a new conception of civic virtue that firmly repudiated the ideal of imperial aggrandizement. In doing so, however, it is to be stressed that Fletcher was

operating within the neo-Machiavellian tradition. Machiavelli too had admitted the possibility of equal leagues, and had noted that they were averse to conquest. So Fletcher, moving from Machiavelli's best model for empire to the second best - the model of the Tuscan federation of city-states - remained a Machiavellian. In brief, Fletcher can be described as a republican and neo-Machiavellian thinker, engaged in constructing a highly peculiar, non-metropolitan and cosmopolitan, theory of empire.²³

Conclusion.

My purpose has been to work out a general interpretative scheme of theories of empire in the formative period of modern political theory. I have shown how the period in question, which corresponds to a canonical subdivision of Western history, also marks a distinctive period in the history of ideas about empire. Essentially, the emergence of the modern notion of the 'empire of commerce' - the final high point of our story - is the outcome of a sequence of debate having its initial high point in Machiavelli's Roman paradigm. The whole process after that can be construed as a series of successive 'Machiavellian moments', each expressing the evolution and internal restructuring of the patterns of thought originally created by Machiavelli.

The change from the Romanist 'empires for conquest' to 'empires for commerce', I have argued, was no less than a change of paradigm. The eighteenth century debate marked the beginning of a new epistemology of discourse about empire. More generally, the whole international order at that point became set in a new historicist and economic dimension. The debate also marked the beginning of a new ideological polarity, between the republican 'neo-Machiavellian' perspective on one hand and the modernist 'proto-liberal' one on the other. Both perspectives - as I argued in the final part of the essay - reveal in turn significant internal subdivisions, ranging from realism to idealism, as it were. In this respect there is an interesting similarity between the contrast internal to the modernist camp and the contrast internal to the republican neo-Machiavellian camp, between the realist-conflictualist Davenant and the idealist-cosmopolitan Fletcher.

One is tempted to say that the alternative visions of empire offered by the protagonists of a debate now almost three centuries old - in particular, the political and normative dilemmas of commercial competition - still lie at the very centre of the current debate over global political order. Hume's sceptical doubts, the doubts of a liberal cosmopolitan intellectual, represent even today a relevant intellectual challenge in respect of the optimistic understanding of international/global affairs, as it is today proposed by neo-liberal theorists of international relations. The same can be said *a fortiori* of Davenant's position, given his ideological presuppositions which stand in a continuity of tradition in relation to the contemporary realist/communitarian orientation.

Again, another major theme which emphasizes the contemporary relevance of the eighteenth-century ideologies of empire is related to the so-called 'politics of extent', a theme which was dealt with in great depth, as I have shown, bringing to surface the multiform problems of creating and governing an integrated political structure over great distances. The debate can be seen as illuminating the concerns of those who are engaged today in theorizing novel modes of political organization, most notably the construction of a global polity.

Finally, the present study offers me the opportunity to emphasize yet another important lesson that can be drawn from the analysis of the imperial ideologies of the eighteenth century, one that concerns a methodological point I consider of fundamental importance. The debate, as it has been here reconstructed, has highlighted the existence of a plurality of alternative visions of the same conceptual construct, the 'empire of commerce'. My contention is that, in order to describe and explain the historical 'reality' of the modern 'empires of commerce', a meaningful description and

²³ On Fletcher, see J. G. A. POCOCK, "Neo-Machiavellian Political Economy: the Augustan Debate over Land, Trade and Credit", in *Machiavellian Moment*, cit., pp. 426-36; J. ROBERTSON, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue*, Edinburgh 1985; J. ROBERTSON, "A. Fletcher's Vision of Union" in R.A. MASON (ed.), *Scotland and England 1286-1815*, Edinburgh 1985, pp. 203-225.

explanation must always include in the first place – and perhaps even take the form of – an attempt to recover and interpret their meaning from the point of view of coeval intellectual culture. In brief, my final lesson is to emphasize the critical importance of a hermeneutic approach to human sciences.

The End

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