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Violence for Equality: Lessons from Machiavelli

John Baker

Political violence is a chronic feature of human history. In our own time, the world is rife with state violence against citizens, with insurrection, with civil war, with political terrorism. Most of the people who write and read papers of political philosophy have never been subjected to such violence, or forced to consider whether or not to take it up, and this perhaps makes any philosophical discussion of political violence academic in the pejorative sense. But the attitudes we take up towards the users and victims of violence can affect the success of their political projects; moreover, political violence is a particularly striking case of a much more general problem, of choosing defensible means to our political ends. So the discussion of political violence is not completely irrelevant to people in safe places.¹

Unlike some other philosophical issues – justice, for example – the issue of political violence is not primarily a conflict between rival political perspectives. We

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Western Michigan University, the University of Utah, and the University of New Mexico. I am grateful for comments from participants, and from Eva Kittay and Ken Baynes. Much of the work on this paper was done while I was a Research Associate at SUNY, Stony Brook. For more recent comments I am grateful to Stefan Auer, Vittorio Bufacchi, Caroline Walsh and the journal's anonymous reviewer.

cannot very usefully ask, for example, whether libertarianism gives a better or worse account of political violence than Rawlsianism, because these perspectives stipulate very different objectives and constraints for political actors contemplating violence, and it is by reference to such aims and restrictions that each actor has to make a judgement. The central question, for each of us, is whether, given our own political perspective, violence would be justified or not. The issue of political violence is thus primarily internal to each perspective, although there will clearly be structural similarities between different cases.

In this paper, my central interest is the use of violence for achieving the radical aim of equality of condition within contemporary capitalist democracies. Since this question has been most prominently treated in a consequentialist way, I begin with a very brief consideration of consequentialist approaches. I then temporarily shift perspective by looking at the more complicated stance taken by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, and go on to try to apply Machiavelli's insights to my primary concern. The result is a Machiavellian argument for an un-Machiavellian conclusion, namely that violence is not a justifiable strategy for radical egalitarians. But I follow Machiavelli further by arguing that this apparently sanguine conclusion is in fact deeply worrying for the egalitarian project.

Many contemporary discussions have concentrated on the concept of violence, and have used what are sometimes contentious accounts of the concept to support a moral position. My discussion is not of this form, and so I do not provide a detailed account of the concept. I try to use the term 'violence' in an everyday sense with its normal connotations, broadly synonymous with 'the exercise of physical force so as to kill or

injure, inflict direct harm or pain on, human beings',² whether this force is exercised by or against the state. As in ordinary language, I would distinguish political violence from the use of force by the state in the course of enforcing politically uncontentious laws, but I do not think that anything here hangs on that distinction. In talking about equality in this paper, I mean to refer to a radically egalitarian political ideal that calls for something like an overall equality of condition, and is thus to be distinguished from liberal egalitarian conceptions of justice that focus on equal opportunity and poverty relief.³ In particular, I

² Norman Geras, 'Our Morals: The Ethics of Revolution', in *Socialist Register 1989: Revolution Today*, eds. R. Miliband, L. Panitch, and J. Saville (London: Merlin Press, 1989), 186. For a useful recent discussion of the concept of violence, see Vittorio Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

Although I find Bufacchi's analysis insightful, the use here of what he calls the minimalist conception of violence avoids making the argument hang on a disputable definition. I use 'political' to refer to 'the set of relationships involved in making and enforcing collectively binding decisions'; see John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon and Judy Walsh, *Equality: From Theory to Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 59. But I do not think that my argument turns on a particular conception of politics.

³ Among the proponents of radical egalitarianism I would include John Baker, *Arguing for Equality* (London: Verso, 1987); G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Bruce M. Landesman,

will make use of the conception of equality of condition put forward in *Equality: From Theory to Action*, which defines equality in terms of five dimensions: respect and recognition; resources; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning.⁴

CONSEQUENTIALIST APPROACHES

Because of its apparent simplicity, classical utilitarianism provides a touchstone for consequentialist approaches to the question of political violence. If the objective is to maximise happiness, the answer seems straightforward enough: on any particular occasion, violence would be justified just in case it would result in more happiness than any alternative policy. The problem is to try to discover appropriate empirical generalisations about the circumstances under which violence does or does not succeed in improving the lot of humanity, a question that seems particularly susceptible to Mill's 'inverse deductive' method, working from both first principles and historical experience.⁵

'Egalitarianism', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 13 (1983): 27-56; Kai Nielsen, *Equality and Liberty: A Defense of Radical Egalitarianism* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985); Richard Norman, *Free and Equal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴ Baker et al., *Equality*, ch. 2.

⁵ J.S. Mill, *A System of Logic*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, volumes vii and viii, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

Of course, once we begin to think about the level of complication utilitarian theories have reached in discussing other topics such as truthfulness, punishment, social justice, democracy and liberty (to mention only some of the issues raised by Mill himself), we can give up any hope of a simple, uncontroversial utilitarian position on political violence. In the areas just mentioned, utilitarians have developed sophisticated strategies that often have the effect of bringing their conclusions much closer to ‘common sense’ morality. The moral complexity that in a more pluralistic outlook lies on the surface of moral deliberation reappears in sophisticated forms of utilitarianism in the middle ranges of the theory. Thus the simple surface structure of utilitarianism hides complexity rather than avoiding it. One of my central aims in this paper is to try to provide a structure for dealing with this complexity more adequately.

The consequentialist approach has been taken in several well-known discussions of political violence, of which the most directly relevant to our purposes is Ted Honderich’s treatment of violence for equality.⁶ Honderich’s view is that ‘the left’ is interested in greater equality and freedom. Violence is justified if it produces more of these goods than it costs. The problem, as with utilitarianism, lies in predicting the effects of violence, and Honderich’s own view is that we cannot be confident about these effects and therefore cannot be confident about violence. Although he discusses anti-consequentialist objections to violence, he has little sympathy for them, maintaining that

⁶ Ted Honderich, *Violence for Equality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

in any situation where violence is on the agenda, such principles will conflict, throwing the issue back to consequentialist assessment.

My reservations about Honderich's approach are twofold. First, although it is easy to sympathise with Honderich's impatience towards those opponents of violence who are no friends of equality, I shall argue that egalitarians must take non-consequentialist arguments more seriously. Secondly, I shall argue that even within the area of consequentialist argument it is possible to give more structure to the question than Honderich provides. I shall start by looking at Machiavelli's more eclectic approach to violence, and then try to apply some of the considerations he raises to the issue of violence for equality.

THE MACHIAVELLIAN PERSPECTIVE

The interpretation of Machiavelli is notoriously controversial: writing in 1972, Isaiah Berlin had already counted twenty distinct interpretations, and proceeded to add another one onto the heap.⁷ My aim here is not, however, to interpret Machiavelli but to use him, concentrating in particular on a straightforward reading of the text of *The*

⁷ Isaiah Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli', in *Studies on Machiavelli*, ed. Myron P. Gilmore (Florence: Sansoni, 1972): 147-206; reprinted in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997): 269-325.

Prince.⁸ Machiavelli's writings are useful for any discussion of political violence for at least three reasons. The first is that he famously maintains that violence is part of the very fabric of political life. Secondly, his treatment, though succinct, seems to be an eclectic combination of consequentialist and non-consequentialist perspectives. A third reason is that he is an intensely political writer, treating politics as a distinct arena that, as Croce puts it, 'has its own laws against which it is vain to rebel, nor can politics itself be exorcised or chased out of the world with holy water'.⁹ Even though his political aims can hardly be called egalitarian in twenty-first century terms, his writings do have a real relevance to our issue, as I hope to demonstrate.

Consequentialist elements: power and security

On the surface, Machiavelli's discussion in *The Prince* seems strictly consequentialist. The central aim of the book is to tell princes how to gain and maintain their rule. Chapters 1-11 give detailed advice on how princes can come to power, chapters 12-14 on how they can defend themselves from others, and chapters 15-23 on how they can fend off internal dangers. The final three chapters apply the general discussion to

⁸ It might be objected that every use of an author involves an implicit interpretation. In this paper, my specific understandings of Machiavelli's texts are set out as I cite them, but I eschew any grander interpretive framework.

⁹ Benedetto Croce, 'Machiavelli and Vico', in *Politics and Morals*, trans. Salvatore J. Castiglione (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945): 58-66.

Machiavelli's Italy, exhorting the Italian princes to do something about the appalling situation he surveys.

We shall see in a moment that this simple picture is inadequate; but even considered as a piece of purely consequentialist writing, *The Prince* offers valuable insights into political violence. To assess these clearly, it helps to make a three-way distinction between what I shall call the moral, policy and prudential consequences of political acts. The moral consequences of an act are those relevant to whatever consequentialist moral principles we wish to apply to them. Thus, for classical utilitarians the moral consequences are effects on happiness, while for Honderich they are effects on freedom and equality. By contrast, policy and prudence are both what might be called strictly political considerations. Policy consequences are those relating to the particular policies a political actor wants to implement, whether these are building an empire, accumulating wealth, propagating Christianity, feeding the poor, improving public health, or whatever. These aims may or may not be derived from moral principles, but in any case they are typically more specific. Prudential consequences have to do with the ability of political actors to attain and hold onto political power in the first place. Machiavelli simply reminds us of the fact that we cannot achieve our policy objectives unless we have political power, and that what's necessary for achieving this power may be largely distinct from anything to do with what the power is to be used for.

This distinction is only implicit in *The Prince*, mainly because in that book Machiavelli credits princes with little in the way of policy objectives other than to maintain and expand their own power and glory, and because he is typically seen as

rejecting morality altogether. There is thus little conflict between objectives laid down by morality, policy and prudence. But Machiavelli's discussion of Savonarola in chapter 6 is an example where the aims come unstuck. Savonarola may well have had admirable objectives, but he neglected to do what was necessary to maintain his political position and was defeated. In particular, he failed to see that regardless of one's moral and policy aims, it is prudentially necessary to be prepared to use violence. As Machiavelli comments, with characteristic over-generalisation:

All armed prophets have conquered, and unarmed prophets have come to grief....
Therefore one must urgently arrange matters so that when [the people] no longer believe they can be made to believe by force.¹⁰

In chapter 17, Machiavelli again stresses the need for 'cruelty', especially among new princes, 'because of the abundant dangers in a newly won state'. As Pocock argues, the need for force is particularly acute for new princes and, by extension, for political innovators of all kinds. This is because they act in a 'delegitimised' setting, in which the ancient customs that legitimate long-standing regimes have been swept away.¹¹ The new prince faces particular dangers from those who are threatened by his rule. That is why

¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, revised ed., trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), ch. 6.

¹¹ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), ch. 6.

Cesare Borgia had to act to ‘crush’ the Orsini at Sinigalia.¹² In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli explains how the same logic required Brutus to kill his own sons, securing the Roman republic against a return to tyranny.¹³ Machiavelli’s view on the prudential necessity of violence is unambiguous.

For our purposes, the first lesson of all this is straightforward. Since being in power is a necessary precondition for carrying out policy, any position we are inclined to adopt on political violence has to pass three tests: it has to achieve not just its moral and policy objectives but must also allow us to gain and maintain power. What raises serious issues for egalitarianism is Machiavelli’s contention that violence is prudentially necessary regardless of aim; for, as we shall see, the moral and policy consequences of political violence are likely to be anti-egalitarian.

Prudential constraints on violence

Machiavelli certainly maintains that the successful prince must be prepared to use violence. But his endorsement of violence is qualified in two different ways. The first and most important qualification is prudential. Violence must not be used in a way that undermines the prince’s political position. Thus, for example, Machiavelli stresses throughout *The Prince* that one must avoid being hated. Although he considers interfering

¹² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 7.

¹³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), Book III, ch. iii.

with property and with women to be the prime causes of hatred, he acknowledges that excessive cruelty can also be a cause, advising in chapter 17 that 'If ... it does become necessary to execute someone, this should be done only when there is proper justification and manifest reason for it'. And in chapter 19, he points out that the emperor Maximinus became hated for this very reason: 'he impressed the people as being extremely savage (*crudelissimo*) because he inflicted many cruelties through his prefects in Rome and in other parts of the empire'. The prince must aim to be feared without being hated. Violence is necessary to achieve the fear, but hatred must be carefully avoided.

Earlier, in his discussion of Agathocles, Machiavelli lays down more specific rules for the use of violence:

We can say that cruelty is used well (if it is permissible to talk in this way about what is evil) when it is employed once for all, and one's safety depends on it, and then it is not persisted in but as far as possible turned to the good of one's subjects.¹⁴

These rules derive largely from the necessity to avoid hatred, since prolonged or gratuitous cruelty can provoke this dangerous reaction. But the final rule relates to another general (if popularly unacknowledged) theme of Machiavelli's, which is that the wise prince survives by benefiting the people. Thus he says in chapter 9 that even a prince who is brought to power by the nobility in a 'constitutional principality' should try to win

¹⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 8.

the people over, too: 'it is necessary for a prince to have the friendship of the people; otherwise he has no remedy in times of adversity'. Again, in chapter 19 he emphasises the ways that popular support protects the prince against conspiracies. And in chapter 20, he castigates those who think that they can rely on fortresses to protect themselves against their subjects. On the contrary, he maintains, the support of the people is the prince's strongest fortress. Machiavelli's rule that violence should be used in a way that benefits the people and encourages popular support is of a piece with all this other advice.

There is nothing particularly startling about these conditions for violence. What is important for us is the way Machiavelli brings a focus to prudential considerations independently of the policy aims of the political actor in question. Such a focus allows us to get beyond the very general issue of whether or not violence is likely to 'succeed' to a more concrete examination of the political conditions in which the issue of violence arises, and whether, in particular, violence is likely to create and consolidate, or to undermine, the establishment of effective political power.

Non-consequentialist elements: Virtù and crime

The ethical viewpoint Machiavelli is notorious for challenging in *The Prince* is not a consequentialist one. When he opens his searing discussion in chapter 15, the subject is 'The things for which men, and especially princes, are praised or blamed', those things being a range of conventional classical and Christian virtues like generosity and purity. It is largely in terms of such virtues that the detailed analysis of the following three chapters takes place. When the discussion shifts to speaking of norms of action, these are

not consequentialist but paradigm cases of deontological ethics: norms like telling the truth and keeping promises.

It might be said in reply that these are indeed the ethical positions that Machiavelli opposes, but that he does so precisely by taking a consequentialist stance. Yet although there really is a consequentialist strand in Machiavelli's writing, there is more than that. A key discussion in this respect occurs in chapter 8. There, discussing Agathocles, Machiavelli writes:

Yet it cannot be called *virtù* to kill fellow citizens, to betray friends, to be treacherous, pitiless, irreligious. These ways can win a prince power but not glory.

Virtù, of course, is that much-discussed Machiavellian term for the qualities that princes ought to have if they are to achieve great things. But however much scope there is for disputing the interpretation of this concept, two points seem clear enough. The first is that the *virtuoso* prince cannot always be virtuous (*buono*), since 'a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among the many who are not virtuous'.¹⁵ The second is that *virtù* is nevertheless akin to virtue, in referring in the first instance to the prince's character and beyond that to prohibiting particular kinds of action – action that the title of chapter 8 calls 'crime' (*scelera*). In support of this reading of Machiavelli, one might also think of the famous quotation about Romulus in the

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 15.

Discourses: ‘Though the act accuses, the result excuses’.¹⁶ As Steven Lukes has observed, that is not the attitude of a consequentialist, but of someone who sees a conflict between the intrinsic wrongness of an action and the value of its consequences.¹⁷

The final sentence of the passage about Agathocles shows how these non-consequentialist elements in Machiavelli’s thought infect the consequentialist ones. For on any reading, Machiavelli is urging the prince to strive not just for power but for glory. Glory, however, only accrues to the *virtuoso* prince – the prince who is truly admirable. And admirability depends not just on what one achieves but on how one behaves. Thus, as in all coherent ethical outlooks, there is a systematic interplay between considerations of character, action and consequence.

Non-consequentialist constraints on violence

Whether Machiavelli accepts non-consequentialist values as *conclusive* constraints on violence is more problematic. It is true that he seems to condemn the violence of Agathocles, but the fact that Agathocles is then held up as an exemplar for using cruelty well leads one to wonder whether Machiavelli really objects to his actions. The doubt is reinforced by what Machiavelli says at the beginning of the chapter. After introducing the category of princes who come to power by crime, he writes:

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Book I, ch. ix.

¹⁷ Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 148.

I shall give two examples, one from the ancient world, one from the modern, without otherwise discussing the rights and wrongs (*meriti*) of the subject, because I imagine that these examples are enough for *anyone who has to follow them*.¹⁸

That hardly suggests wholesale condemnation. Nevertheless, Machiavelli clearly prefers the prince of *virtù* to the criminal. And because the *virtuoso* prince exhibits those ‘manly’ attributes of courage, ferocity and greatness of spirit, there is nothing about violent activity per se that is likely to run counter to being a genuinely admirable person. On the contrary, military activity in particular is one of the prime contexts for exhibiting and developing *virtù*.¹⁹ That is one of the reasons why a prince ‘should have no other object or thought, nor acquire skill in anything, except war, its organisation, and its discipline’.²⁰ But as we have seen, there are forms of violence that the *virtuoso* prince could not countenance, that would bring power but not glory.

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 8, emphasis added.

¹⁹ This is made particularly clear by Neal Wood, ‘Machiavelli’s Concept of *Virtù* Reconsidered’, *Political Studies* 15, no. 2 (1967): 159-72; Ivan Hannaford, ‘Machiavelli’s Concept of *Virtù* in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* Reconsidered’, *Political Studies* 20, no. 2 (1972): 185-9; and Russell Price, ‘The Senses of *Virtù* in Machiavelli’, *European Studies Review* 3, no. 4 (1973): 315-45.

²⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 14.

The value of this perspective for an examination of violence for equality is not just that it reminds us that there is more to the evaluation of action than good or bad consequences. It is also that, because it employs a particular and unconventional ethos, it forces us to consider whether there are distinctly egalitarian norms and virtues to which we need to be sensitive in discussing violence: norms and virtues that might get lost in an attempt to talk about violence in a very general or conventional way. In what remains, I shall try to follow Machiavelli's lead. I shall look first at non-consequentialist considerations, before going on to consider the moral consequences of violence. I shall then turn to more strictly political aims, concerning both policy objectives and political efficacy. The result, I hope, will be to provide at least a more helpful structure for discussing violence than is sometimes found in the literature.²¹

A MACHIAVELLIAN TREATMENT OF VIOLENCE FOR EQUALITY

Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism as I understand it has at its core a set of principles of equality. In particular, I endorse a radical conception of 'equality of condition' that has five key

²¹ Geras has also remarked on the lack of specificity of the literature on the ethics of revolution, but his concern is the ethics governing a violent struggle, not the question of whether a violent struggle is justified in the first place ('Our Morals', 189-196). Bufacchi is exceptional in placing more structure on the question, but does so by using just war theory as a template. See *Violence and Social Justice*, ch. 9.

dimensions: respect and recognition; resources; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning.²² In each of these dimensions, the precise meaning of ‘equality’ is open to further specification and does not necessarily refer to *strict* equality, but those details are not relevant to what follows. What is relevant is that this multidimensional conception of equality has both distributional and relational aspects. On the one hand, it aims at much more equal distributions of resources, of the good of being loved and cared for and of the burdens and benefits of working and learning. On the other hand, it calls for much more egalitarian relationships among people, in particular relationships of respect and recognition, of love, care and solidarity, and of power.

Contemporary radical egalitarianism is pluralist not just in its dimensions, but also in terms of the social divisions it addresses. Inequalities of social class are of course still central to egalitarianism, but it is also concerned with gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, age and many other social divisions. As we shall see, gender equality in particular raises important issues about violence.

For Machiavelli, the key political actor is the prince. By contrast, the political project of egalitarianism is a collective one. In the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the ‘prince’ is the political party.²³ But for contemporary, pluralist, complex conceptions of equality,

²² Baker et al., *Equality*, ch. 2.

²³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971),

the relevant political actor is best understood in terms of a network of egalitarian social movements.²⁴ The issue of violence is therefore, for us, a question of the political strategies that these movements should adopt.

Since its aim is to develop a society in conformity with the principles of equality, radical egalitarianism constitutes a political project with a consequentialist character: the best political activities and policies, other things equal, are those that do most to achieve this outcome. Unlike many consequentialist ideals, however, the consequences that radical egalitarians aim for are not aggregative but distributive in structure: they are not (primarily) concerned with the total amount of goods but with achieving more equal distributions of them. In addition, since its principles have both distributional and relational aspects, radical egalitarianism is also a project infused with non-consequentialist values. Those values entail both certain norms of action – that people should be treated with respect and care and without domination – and also an account of the characteristics that are admirable in egalitarian actors: virtues of mutual respect and recognition, of cooperativeness and democracy, of care and solidarity. This is not an all-

124-205. Because both the aims of radical egalitarians, their identification of the relevant collective actor and their foregrounding of normative issues of justice and equality are significantly different from those of Marxism, it would be a mistake to consider the topic of this paper to be very closely related to the issues dealt with by Gramsci or to the particular use he makes of Machiavelli.

²⁴ Baker et al., *Equality*, ch. 10.

embracing conception of the good person, but it does pick out certain key egalitarian character traits. These considerations of consequence, action and character are of a similar structure to Machiavelli's, but their content is very different. The question we have to pursue is whether they are equally consistent with the use of political violence and, if not, what this implies about the feasibility of the radically egalitarian project.

Moral arguments against violence

As we have noticed, the quality of *virtù* is quite consistent with the use of violence in many circumstances. But how consistent is violence with the qualities admirable in an egalitarian? The caring, cooperative, communal, democratic character is hardly the candidate for charging the ruling class with bayonets. In utter contrast with *virtù*, violence does not reinforce the egalitarian virtues but cuts right against them.

This is not to say that the egalitarian is incapable of taking a stand against injustice: far from it. The moral courage to stand up and be counted is as admirable in egalitarian circles as anywhere. But that courage is consistent with viewing one's relationship to the enemies of equality as one of concern and respect, even if they will not return the compliment. The difficulty lies in seeing how these attitudes are consistent with treating others as enemies with whom one is in a violent conflict, enemies one has conditioned oneself to kill or maim. A prolonged campaign of political violence seems to presuppose the absence of those virtues of respect, care and cooperation with which egalitarianism is intrinsically infused.

These observations about the virtues of egalitarians are of course closely related to non-consequentialist egalitarian norms. A relevant discussion is ‘The Case for Pacifism’ by Richard Norman, himself a radical egalitarian.²⁵ Norman argues that the uniqueness of each life gives the principle of respect for life priority over other values such as autonomy and happiness, because those values have to do with the quality of the lives of distinct human beings and derive from the principle that each such being matters for her or his own sake. Norman accepts that the principle is not absolute, and can be overridden by considerations of self-defence or of very great suffering and oppression, but he wonders whether there are very many occasions when such counter-arguments actually prevail. Respect for persons therefore generates a strong presumption against violence, at least insofar as it involves killing.

To this respect-based argument, we should add two others. The first is based on the idea that love, care and solidarity also constitute a key dimension of equality. Like respect, this dimension has a non-consequentialist implication, namely that people should be treated with care. Violence is of course the exact opposite of this principle. The second argument is based on the dimension of power. Here again, the egalitarian is committed not just to bringing about a society of equal power, but to relating to others on the basis of cooperation rather than domination. While violence against oppression may be a way of

²⁵ Richard Norman, ‘The Case for Pacifism’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (1988): 197-210.

resisting domination, it is also a way of dominating one's enemy: again the exact opposite of how egalitarians should behave.

Violent struggle does typically involve bonds of solidarity among those who cooperate in the struggle. The problem is that those bonds do not extend to all members of society. Moreover, the bonds of comradeship in arms are typically shot through by relationships of command and obedience that are very different from democratic cooperation. Democratic armies are not, perhaps, unknown – a famous example is Orwell's celebration of the republican forces in *Homage to Catalonia* – but they are few and far between.²⁶

These non-consequentialist arguments against violence lead naturally to the question of whether there are consequentialist reasons that override them. A familiar point, made by both Arendt and Honderich, is that it is extremely difficult to predict the course of a campaign of violence.²⁷ Honderich treats this as a basis for even-handed scepticism, since it is also difficult to predict the course of a campaign of non-violence. But we do know one thing about a campaign of violence, namely that it necessarily creates inequalities by causing harm to its victims. Since the consequences that egalitarianism aims at are distributive rather than aggregative, it is not enough to protest that violence may lead to less overall suffering than non-violence. One must also show

²⁶ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1951).

²⁷ Arendt, *On Violence*; Honderich, *Violence for Equality*.

that it would lead to a more equal outcome, and would not simply replace one oppressed group by another. Moreover, as Bufacchi emphasises, if there is one generalisation that holds pretty consistently through history, it is that those who are violently attacked by their opponents usually step up their oppression rather than give way, leading to an escalating cycle of violence that is likely to harm the people who are already disadvantaged.²⁸ Because of its distributive character, egalitarianism cannot justify that harm by the good that may accrue to others.

We can allow for the sake of argument that the case is not water-tight, that in principle a violent campaign might lead to greater equality. But the way that the resort to violence immediately generates inequalities, together with the difficulty of finding revolutions that have really achieved equality, supports a strong consequentialist presumption against violence.

Policy arguments against violence

Although these general moral arguments against violence are powerful, generations of revolutionaries have tended to discount them on broadly Machiavellian grounds, namely that although it may be morally admirable to reject violence, it is politically necessary to use it. And so it is important to consider more strictly political issues if the argument against violence is to have any real force. Let us, then, consider the effect of violence on the specific policy aims of egalitarians. Egalitarians seek a society of

²⁸ Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice*.

mutual respect, yet violent struggles are likely to promote mutual distrust and disdain. Egalitarians aim at equality of resources, but violent conflicts often destroy people's property, render them homeless and wreck water, sanitation and power infrastructures. Egalitarians are trying to bring about societies that satisfy the love and care needs of all their members, but being subjected to violence is the polar opposite of this goal. Egalitarians want to reduce power inequalities, yet violent struggles not only typically operate through authoritarian organisations whose modes of thought are difficult to dislodge, but also teach their participants that if you can't get what you want by persuasion then you can always try force. Egalitarians want decent work and self-realising learning for all, but in the wake of a violent conflict, people are likely to be overwhelmed by the sheer toil of reconstruction.

These multidimensional ways that violence can undermine the political aims of egalitarianism are forcefully illustrated by their impact on sexual equality. In most of the political violence in recorded history, women have figured more heavily on the side of the victims than of the perpetrators, and have shouldered disproportionate costs in caring for the wounded and maimed. Even if one is sceptical about the view that men are inherently violent and women inherently nurturing, these role expectations remain dominant in contemporary cultures, and violent conflicts reinforce them. The tendency of groups engaged in violent struggles to glorify their male heroes and to neglect the contributions and sufferings of women augurs badly for a gender-egalitarian aftermath.

All of these arguments are at their strongest when considering the idea of a violent campaign aimed at achieving something like a fully egalitarian society. They are much

weaker if the issue is whether to use violence to ameliorate a situation of severe oppression – to make a very unequal society a little more equal. In some contemporary societies, violence may be the only remotely feasible option for the oppressed, and perhaps even their only really dignified response.²⁹ As Arendt and Honderich argue, violence can also sometimes be effective in articulating grievances and bringing about reforms.³⁰ An egalitarian movement may also find itself up against forces that are beyond any kind of democratic control, for example the interventions of foreign governments or corporations, that may only respond to violence. These cases raise further questions about the constraints within which violence should be practised, questions of undoubted importance but for another occasion.³¹ My primary aim here is to argue that political violence poses serious problems for an egalitarian movement intent on radical change within a capitalist democracy: problems that are both ethical and political, that are much more severe than those faced by Machiavelli's prospective prince, and that make the use of violence in such cases highly dubious. Contrary to what may be thought, the case against such revolutionary violence turns out to be stronger than the case against using violence for ameliorating extreme inequality.

²⁹ Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice*, ch. 9.

³⁰ Arendt, *On Violence*; Honderich, *Violence for Equality*.

³¹ For useful discussions, see Geras, 'Our Morals', and Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice*, ch. 9.

Prudential arguments over violence

Claiming that revolutionary violence is a doubtful strategy for contemporary radical egalitarians is hardly controversial; the revolutionary left is practically non-existent in any case. But when we consider the prudential dimension of Machiavelli's approach, this comforting conclusion becomes problematic. For as we have noted, Machiavelli maintains that violence is practically inevitable in any attempt to gain and maintain power, particularly for a new prince or other political innovator facing the reaction of those he dispossesses. If that is true, then radical egalitarians seem to be placed in a hopeless dilemma, forced to choose between political failure and self-defeating success. But perhaps it is false; after all, Machiavelli wrote a long time ago. Perhaps politics has changed sufficiently that violence is no longer a vital ingredient of success.

The strongest support for this revised conclusion comes from considering Machiavelli's claim that successful rulers should act to maintain popular support. However paradoxical this view may appear in the context of Machiavelli's own writings, it is a political consideration of crucial importance to the egalitarian project. This is because the political strength that an egalitarian movement would need for accomplishing its aims could not possibly be limited to control over the apparatus of the state. No merely legal strategy could bring about the kind of cooperative society egalitarians seek, and thus any account of the power necessary for achieving this objective must go beyond control of the state to the idea of a very broadly-based social consensus.

At a more pedestrian level, it is perfectly obvious that in most capitalist democracies there is a deeply entrenched belief in the 'democratic process', however strongly we might wish to point out the limitations of this process in practice. Although revolutionaries have frequently used violence against western liberal democratic states, they have been markedly unsuccessful in challenging the popular belief that such violence is undemocratic and therefore illegitimate.

Another prudential argument raised by Machiavelli concerns the issue of counter-violence. Machiavelli assumes that aspiring princes will face violence from those they displace. They need to be prepared to 'kill the sons of Brutus'. But in our era, the argument might seem to be reversed. For it might be argued that, so long as egalitarian forces abstain from the use of force, their opponents are unlikely to be able to use force against them, and a peaceful social revolution remains possible. Once, however, we begin to use violence on our own part, we are merely inviting a violent reaction. Thus the politically expedient course is to renounce violence completely.

I do not know whether anyone seriously maintains this argument, though it seems to me to have a ring of authenticity about it. One has only to set it out, however, to see that it depends on the assumption that conservative forces will only use violence to defend their position if violently attacked. Since we in fact have very few historical cases of radically progressive movements coming to power through non-violent means, the hypothesis is hard to refute empirically, but such examples as the Spanish Civil War and the overthrow of Allende and the Sandanistas are far from reassuring. As those examples illustrate, the threat of violence from opponents at home is exacerbated by the likelihood

of foreign intervention. A radically egalitarian movement would not just be challenging local elites but international capitalism.

At a more theoretical level, it is easy to see that the defenders of privilege encounter few of the objections we have canvassed against the use of violence. Indeed, one might bluntly suggest that since their political objective is not a matter of principle at all but simply to maintain their position, they face no serious ethical obstacles. Or less cynically, that their position is similar to that of Machiavelli's prince, because their moral and political ideals – the right to private property, the importance of stable political authority, the legitimacy of competitive struggle, and so on – sustain rather than undermine the use of force to protect their position. Like the prince, they need popular support, but this need is not as pressing as the need of egalitarians, since (like established, hereditary princes) for the most part what they need is merely passive acceptance, and since what they are trying to accomplish is much more amenable to being implemented through the use of state power. Naturally, were they to find themselves completely bereft of supporters, they would face a serious political problem. But, for them, the strategic implication of this fact is that it would be better to strike sooner rather than later, before their radical opponents have succeeded in gathering overwhelming popular endorsement.

If the reversed form of Machiavelli's argument is unconvincing, we are left with its original form: that anyone who challenges those currently in power must command superior forces and be prepared to use them. Unarmed prophets come to grief. This is not a question of contemplating *coups d'état*, but of having a strategy for standing up to, and if necessary defeating militarily, the violence of the right. Is that level of commitment to

the possible use of force acceptable? We seem indeed to be faced with a cruel dilemma. For if we reject violence, then the prospects for sustained radical change seem doomed. But if we accept its use, then we are up against all the moral and political objections we have already looked at.

Answers to the dilemma?

Is there an answer to the dilemma? It's hard to see one. Traditionally, the most widely practised answer was an ideology of gradualism that seemed to expect the world to change from one social form to another without any of the major losers really noticing. Since no gradualist movement has come anywhere near to making fundamental changes to the structure of capitalist societies, we have some reason to be sceptical of this strategy. Closely allied with gradualism are Fabian and Gandhian strategies that aim to avoid or to defeat violence non-violently by making a moral or intellectual appeal to the privileged to renounce their oppression. Alas, there is again precious little support for the belief that such a conversion is possible. This is not because ethical considerations are completely incapable of overriding self-interest, but because they do not seem capable of doing so on the required scale.

Perhaps a more 'Gramscian' strategy of trying to create a new ideological hegemony falls into a different category.³² The aim would be to build such a climate of

³² I refer to this strategy as 'Gramscian' because of its emphasis on ideological change. However, Gramsci's own analysis in the *Prison Notebooks* of the respective contributions

egalitarianism among the populace that the old regime is no longer politically sustainable. Something of this structure seems to have occurred in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, allowing in most cases for a peaceful transfer of power, and is therefore worthy of a closer examination than is possible here. But these cases of democratic transition are sufficiently different in context and ambition from those of egalitarian transformation that their lessons are hard to discern.³³ In particular, the fact that these regimes were undemocratic but not wholly efficient in silencing dissent meant that an ideological alternative, already flourishing abroad, was able to establish a really widespread hold before changes of regime took place.

In capitalist democracies, the incubation of a new ideological hegemony is likely to be arrested prematurely by a narrow victory at the polls. A radical government with the support of at best a slim majority of the population would not be in a position to declare the fruitlessness of challenging its rule and would therefore be likely to provoke the counter-revolution on which our dilemma is founded. To pin one's hopes on the idea that such a counter-revolution would be seen as illegitimate, because it violated the

of ideological change and revolutionary force shows that he himself did not countenance a dilemma of the sort addressed here.

³³ For a useful survey of interpretations of 1989, see Andrew Arato, 'Interpreting 1989', in *Civil Society, Constitution and Legitimacy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 1-41.

democratic rules of the game, seems misguided, first, because it expects an exceptional degree of moral constraint over self-interest, and secondly, because it underestimates the degree to which a movement proposing a radically egalitarian transformation of the rules of civil society would itself be viewed as illegitimate by its opponents. Such a movement would indeed be a 'new prince', a political innovator operating in a de-legitimised setting.

As before, it is important to distinguish in all these cases between a radically egalitarian political project and an essentially reformist one. Strategies renouncing violence may well be successful in achieving reforms; indeed, the transitions in Eastern Europe were from an egalitarian point of view precisely of this character, since they represented (at best) a significant shift towards greater overall equality of condition.³⁴ Many other egalitarian social movements have achieved significant gains by non-violent means. The case made here is about the difficulty of extending those strategies to more radical aims.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper I have argued that radical egalitarians face a real dilemma in their political project. Not only do their aims rest on an ethical outlook that runs strongly against the use of violence, but its use is likely to be counter-productive both in

³⁴ In these countries, political reforms have aimed at greater political equality, though economic reforms have exacerbated economic inequality. Whether this counts as a move towards greater overall equality of condition probably varies from country to country.

implementing their principles and in establishing and maintaining popular support. At the same time, the belief that an attempt to radically change the structure of capitalist societies would not be met by violent opposition seems naive. The gradualist strategy that has marked western social democracy and is now virtually unchallenged provides no answer to the dilemma, while what I've labelled the 'Gramscian' strategy seems liable to premature firing. The dilemma is not particularly new – it might be said to have plagued the socialist movement since its inception. But I hope that by running the argument through Machiavellian considerations it is less likely to be dismissed either by people who think that a dose of Machiavellian 'realism' is enough to dissolve the problem or by those who think that the problem of reactionary violence has evaporated. My argument has been rooted in Machiavelli's analysis of the use of force in politics, an analysis that still seems relevant nearly five centuries later. But Machiavelli also wrote that the prince must be both a lion and a fox, 'because a lion is defenceless against traps and a fox is defenceless against wolves'.³⁵ Perhaps the egalitarian movement can yet be lion enough to confront oppression but fox enough to avoid the trap of violence.

³⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 18.