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Can Politics Be Beautiful?

Review of the book

The Art of Power: Machiavelli, Nietzsche and the Making of Aesthetic Political Theory by Diego von Vacano, Lexington Books, 2007

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All wars, even those conducted justly (jus in bello), involve harsh scenes. But since the invention of the camera, in the mid-nineteenth century, these scenes are documented. And ever since the invention of television and the Internet, in the 20th century, these scenes are brought ever closer to us. Each of us, as Susan Sontag argues in her classic book *On Photography*, has watched more suffering than any other person who lived before the age of photography. Visual images, violent and non-violent, increasingly dominate the way we perceive and judge the events that they document. But even if the visual images do not determine how people judged the war, they certainly do determine the starting point of the debate about the war. Such images, everyone agreed, call for either severe condemnation or for convincing justification.

We live in a visual culture. People read and write less, and view and photograph more. Information streaming in to us by means of the various media – mainly television and the Internet – includes fewer and fewer words and abstract arguments yet increasingly more visual images aimed at our sensory and aesthetic cognition. Therefore, any attempt to comprehend the conduct of contemporary politics must deal with its aesthetic aspect, and more general with the old and complicated relationship between politics and aesthetics.

The oscillatory nature of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the West's intellectual history, begins with Plato. In his *Republic*, Plato banishes the poets from the polis that he sets up in Logos. Thus, Plato seeks to prevent the citizens' exposure to aesthetics' seductive powers, which by means of manipulating the senses presents the unreal as real. According to Plato, aesthetics range in the area of sensuality, whereas politics should be conducted solely within the bounds of reason. Therefore one should keep as far away as possible from aesthetics. Yet the power of the aesthetic medium is so dominant that even Plato who warns of it in such a clear voice, cannot resist it. Time after time, in the *Republic*, Plato uses myths – laden with visual images and other aesthetic means – not just as "noble lies" by means of which he seeks to maneuver the masses into rational-like behavior, but also, possibly mainly, in order to express the truth that can not be expressed by the logos.

Nevertheless, at least formally, Plato takes care to maintain a set hierarchy that positions politics above aesthetics. Aesthetics, he asserts, is merely a tool, and as such has no intrinsic value.

In *The Art of Power* Vacano presents two philosophers who at different times and in different contexts criticized this position of Plato's, and offered a substitute: Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). In a rebellious act, they both transgress the limited traditional identification of the aesthetic with the beautiful – which Plato identifies also with the Good and with Truth – and adopt instead a more broader and modern definition of aesthetics that relates to anything perceived by the senses. This definition enables them to assert that man is

not a rational or political creature by nature, but specifically an aesthetic creature. For its senses, rather than its rationality or its social skills, are the means by which it interacts with its environment and leaves its mark on it. Politics, according to their view, is not a product of reason or morals but rather an aesthetic project, in which man leaves his personal and unique mark – not a general and eternal mark – in the raw material of humanity. Therefore, the political theories that they offer hark back to the original sense of Greek *theoria*, that denotes the act of physically *looking, observing*, which belongs in the realm of the senses. And as such, their political theories are characterized by the transferring of concepts from the aesthetic realm to the political. So, for example, the concept of perspective – as denoting a private point of view of the general reality, which man, as a finite being, in principle cannot transcend – becomes one of the main concepts in Nietzsche's political theory, a concept he inherits from Machiavelli, whom he holds in rare appreciation (95). The far-reaching implication of transferring the principle of perspective from the aesthetic realm to the political realm means separating the political realm from morality. For if all political actions are always and necessarily a matter of personal and subjective perspective, it is not possible to subject them to moral judgment that is universal and objective.

The assertion that the basis of Machiavelli's conception of man and politics is aesthetic, enables Vacano to shed new light on this philosopher who is usually perceived as a cold, ruthless, self-serving cynic. To support his assertion, Vacano turns to a close reading of the literary part of Machiavelli's oeuvre – especially of poetry and of letters that have not yet received the attention they deserve – before he begins to analyze Machiavelli's more famous works, chief among them, *The Prince*. Adjoining the aesthetic part to the political part of the Florentine philosopher's oeuvre leads Vacano to the conclusion that Machiavelli's main argument is a double one: only be means of the aesthetic medium can the political man's existential burden be properly exposed and understood; and only by means of perceiving politics as an aesthetic project, can the political man extricate himself from this tragic burden.

Machiavelli foreshadows Existentialism in his use of the aesthetic medium for the purpose of inquiring into the tragic state of man whom he perceives as wretched and lonely in a hostile and fickle world. Man in general, and political man in particular, Machiavelli asserts, is necessarily doomed to fail. For ultimately an unforeseen and uncontrollable change of his circumstances for the worse may completely ruin not only the various enterprises into which he pours his most valuable time and skills, but may even ruin his own self. Neither religion, nor morality, nor science – nor even the political science of Machiavelli himself, which is dedicated to the cultivation of the prince's virtue – can completely fortify the city walls against the fickleness of fate and its purposeless destructiveness. Moreover, neither religion, science, nor morality have the means to essentially describe the heavy burden mortal beings carry, and the deep tragedy in which they are immersed. Only by aesthetic means – such as poetry and rich metaphoric writing – can the basic state of human existence be accounted for. For that reason, Machiavelli not only combines aesthetic motifs in his political essays – such as personification of the unpredictable and uncontrollable element of existence in the form of Fortuna – but he also writes poetry that seeks to inquire into the burden and tragedy of human existence. So, for example, in his poem "The Golden Ass" he captivatingly speaks at length of political man from the point of view of a wretched and ungrateful ass. In the same context, he concludes another of his poems, "Ingratitude" with the following assertion:

“Let everyone abhor both court and state:
For there’s no shorter way to make man hate
The things he wanted most, once he has had them.”

But aesthetics, for Machiavelli, not only allows the identification of the human existential burden, but also the release from it. Observation of the beautiful and becoming one with it, is described by Machiavelli in "The Golden Ass" almost in terms of redemption. In place of the wretchedness of the political world, the aesthetic world holds promise of sensual delight. However, the ambition of a political man like Machiavelli did not allow him to abandon the political world to

become engrossed in the aesthetic. Instead, Machiavelli seeks to combine the two worlds, turning the Prince's political engagement into an aesthetic one. Not only in the sense that in political action the prince disguises reality behind a screen of aesthetic images meant to maneuver at once both his enemies on the one hand, and his citizens on the other; but also, and mainly, in the sense that like the artist, the prince in his political action, seeks to impose order, meaning, and stable form on the chaotic world that is in constant flux.

New creation obliges the prince, as it does the artist, to transcend all moral bounds and social mores. Therefore, Machiavelli's virtue, as Vacano asserts, is fundamentally, "the ability to foresee opportunities presented by fortune and to adapt accordingly to circumstances in order to establish something great and of duration. And this sort of virtù is aesthetic, for it requires imagination, creativity, flexibility, and plasticity. It is neither driven by moral rectitude nor by political ideals, but simply by the desire to create order out of either nothing or something intractable. This challenge requires artistic creativity." (115)

The perception of the political project of the prince as an aesthetic project is strengthened when taking into account that as opposed to our modern concept of state, for Machiavelli the state (*stato*) is not impersonal but "of the ruler". It is the medium through which the ruler casts himself upon others, just as the artist casts himself on the material at hand.

Vacano is absolutely right in asserting that as for Machiavelli, so for Nietzsche, the political project is essentially an aesthetic project. But his claim that for Nietzsche, as for Machiavelli, the ultimate test of this project is in its ability to ensure the political establishment with order and stability for as long as possible (87), seems to me less grounded. On the contrary, as I shall attempt to show, Nietzsche maintained that from the total criticism principle, it follows that a successful political project comes to an unavoidable end precisely in the deliberate and absolute destruction by its very own ruler.

The total criticism principle, which is the organizing principle in Nietzsche's philosophy, asserts that the Overman (Übermensch) must not accept anything as a given; he must completely doubt every scientific theory, moral value or metaphysical assertion. According to Nietzsche, only he who adopts the total criticism principle, is living on his own terms – both in that he is sufficient to himself (autarkic) and in that he makes his own laws (autonomous). Contrary to Kant, the laws that the Overman makes are not general laws but private laws that express the Overman's ability to detach from any common value and to form his own world by his own effort.

The Overman's creation is aesthetic in the sense that it carries its own significance within itself. Every law that the Overman makes gains its significance from the particular context within which it is made. Just as every motif in a musical work gains its significance from the entirety of its relations with other motifs in the work. Nietzsche did think that the only possible justification of a work is aesthetic – "the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon" he asserts in *The Birth of Tragedy* – but he was against minimizing the critical creativity solely to the aesthetic medium, and calls for applying it to life in general. This is the unavoidable political context in which Nietzsche believes in conducting "grand politics" beyond good and evil, whose sole purpose is to express the Will to Power of "the man of grand style", the Overman.

However, and crucially, he who is ruler of himself must not depend upon anything, not even on his own ruling and creation. Therefore, just as the great style obligates the Overman to create his own political world, it also obligates him to destroy his creation by his own hands. Only by means of creating and destroying political beings one after another, Nietzsche asserts, is the Overman likely to prove to himself that he is as powerful as reality itself, that creates and destroys an infinite number of individuals in an infinite number of ways.

The application of the cycle of creation and destruction not only to plastic and musical beings but also to political beings is intolerable from a moral point of view. So that even if Machiavelli's and Nietzsche's attempts to restore the city's poets, whom Plato banished, is appealing and seductive, still the moral price of the union that they endorse between politics and aesthetics raises heavy doubts as to its advisability. To such a marriage between politics and aesthetics, one

can, at least, apply the famous Jewish folk-saying, “Marriage resembles a city under siege – those on the outside wish to enter, and those on the inside wish to escape”.