Machiavelli’s Use of Umori in The Prince

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Machiavelli’s use of the concept of umori is a neglected area of scholarly research.¹ His use of other key terms such virtù (Price, “The Senses of Virtù”; Plamenatz), fortuna (Flanagan), ordini (Whitfield), gloria (Santi; Price, “The Theme of Gloria”), liberty (Colish), and stato (Hexter) has been carefully studied, and Machiavelli scholarship has benefitted greatly from it. What I undertake to do here is initiate a comparable analysis of his use of umori.

Umori is originally a medical term defining the constitution of the human body, human health and temperament.² The four humours—blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile—according to ancient medicine were thought to be the constitutive elements of the human body. Each humour possessed a quality opposed to that of every other humour. But when they were mixed according to a due proportion, as in the human body, they produced health. Sickness, in turn, was understood as an imbalance in the humoral relationship, i.e. a state in which one humour as it were sought to dominate all the other humours. The science of medicine was the science of treating the humoral imbalance, of keeping the due proportion of each humour in the body.

Every student of Machiavelli knows that he viewed the science of medicine as an exemplary science for politics: “In the illnesses that men suffer from, they ever have recourse to the judgements or to the remedies that have been pronounced or prescribed by the ancients . . . and medicine is nothing other than the experiments made by the ancient physicians.”³ He spoke of “bodies of men” and of the practice of “purging the humours” that doctors recommend (3.1:195); of “strong medicine”; of what “physicians say of consumption”; of the need for “early diagnosis” of political illnesses (The Prince 3:259–60). A famous character in Mandragola, Callimaco, was a doctor of medicine, trained in Paris. The discussion of Machiavelli’s use of umori should be placed against the background of his knowledge of contemporary medicine and its assumed exemplary character for politics.⁴

In his writings he uses umori in two senses: as applying to the understanding of the health and the temperament of the individual, and as applying to the health and structure of political society or body politic. There are some fifty instances of the use of the term in his political writings—far too many to be adequately treated within the limits of one paper. I have therefore limited the scope of this paper to its use in The Prince alone.

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Umori occurs only in two chapters of The Prince: chapter 9, where the civic principality is analysed, and in chapter 19 where the ethical question of avoiding hatred and contempt is discussed. Thus it occurs once in the section devoted to the structural aspects of principalities (chapters 2–11), and once in the section devoted to the ethical behaviour of the princes (chapters 15–19). The paucity of the use in The Prince, however, should not be interpreted as an indication of any unimportance of the concept for understanding Machiavelli’s political theory. For umori is used in The Prince not rhetorically but theoretically. That is to say, it is used as a means of enunciating a general theory of the structure of the body politic, especially principalities. And since the structure of the body politic, according to Machiavelli, has implication for the ethical rules applicable to rulers, it follows that the use of umori in The Prince has also some important ethical consequences. In other words the theory of umori connects both the structural and ethical issues of the book.5

II. Umori as Applied to the Body Politic

The idea of umori is first introduced in the context of the discussion of civic principalities. A civic principality is a “new” principality in which the prince needs the support of its social classes, the grandi and the populo, to come to power and to maintain it. The grandi and the populo, in their turn, need the support of the prince if they are to satisfy their separate and opposed interests. Thus there is a necessary mutual dependence of the princes and the social classes. But almost as soon as he has stated this interesting theory, he seems to realize that this relationship is only one instance of a more general relationship, according to which every political regime has a particular mode of relationship between the ruling element and the social classes. And he uses the term umori to convey this point. In other words, there is a theory of political humours, which applies not only to civic principalities, not only to principalities in general, but also to the political regime as such:

To such a principality a man rises with the aid of either the populo or of the grandi, for in every city these two opposing humours exist. The civil principality originates thus: the populo desire not to be dominated and oppressed by the grandi; the grandi desire to dominate and oppress the populo. From these two opposed appetites, one of three effects is born in the city: principality, liberty (republic) of licenzia (oligarchy). (The Prince 3:271)

With characteristic brevity Machiavelli has packed a number of important ideas in the above passage. First, he makes a universal statement regarding the structure of political regimes, irrespective of whether they are principalities, republics or oligarchies: in every city there are two opposed humours. The unity of a political regime, according to his statement, is organic. Secondly, the term umori means here one of two things: it can mean the social classes themselves; in this case, the grandi pf the populo; or it can mean the distinctive disposition or temperament or appetites of these classes. These
dispositions are identified as the desire to dominate and oppress on the part of one humour, and the desire is not to be dominated and oppressed on the part of the other. The opposition between these dispositions are natural, permanent, and necessary. As to who would constitute the grandi and popolo of a society at a given time would be a matter of history to indicate. But the point that Machiavelli makes here is theoretical: there would always be these divisions in political society.

The notion of opposition in question is a notion taken from the ancient medical science. We, in modernity, are not familiar with the nuances of this conception of opposition. We are predisposed to think of opposition in dialectical terms exclusively. But the notion of opposition underlying the theory of umori is quite different. According to that theory, one humour requires the active opposition of the other humour as a condition for its own healthy existence. If mutual opposition and mutual toleration did not exist, the organism could not exist as a healthy organism. It would become diseased or "corrupted," or moribund. Active mutual opposition, in other words, is a sign and a requirement of organic health.

Applied to body politic, what this means is that first, social classes are the basic constitutive units of political regimes as such; and secondly, that, for there to be a healthy political organism, there must be active opposition between classes. The constituting social classes ought not to seek the elimination of one another. If they did that, the organism itself perishes. Rather, each humour should seek the satisfaction of its appetites in the context of the health of the organism as a whole. There is no question of a class struggle in the modern Hegelian or Marxian senses of the term. Satisfaction, not recognition, is the key notion in Machiavelli’s theory, whereas in Hegel and Marx, recognition is what everyone seeks after; and recognition can be achieved only if one class “overcomes” another; satisfaction, on the other hand, requires the co-existence of the “enemy” class as a condition for one’s own active existence.

Thirdly, one of the implications of the theory of humours is that the body politic must somehow satisfy the humours of each class in a way consistent with the structure of the regime. And it must satisfy it with the force of an organic, naturalistic necessity. The imperative to satisfy humoral needs, then, is not strictly speaking a moral imperative; it is a premoral or an amoral naturalistic imperative. That is the implication of the concept of umori.6

Finally, the passage above speaks of three “effects” resulting from the opposition of political humours. The humoral conflicts, in other words, have a causal influence on the political regimes. Speaking universally, once again, Machiavelli asserts that such conflicts produce one of three effects: principality or republic or licenzia—a comprehensive classification of regimes from the point of view of umori. In The Prince, naturally, he develops how the conflict of political humours accounts for the structural differences of the various kinds of principalities analysed, as well as for the behavioural
problems that this creates for the new prince. The problem of the conflict of political humours in a good republic is analysed at great length in the Discourses. And as for how humoral conflicts characterize a licenzi a, this is treated extensively in Machiavelli’s third great work, the History of Florence. The theory of humours is also the theoretical presupposition of the Discourse on the Remodeling of the Government of Florence. Thus, there is a prima facie consistency in Machiavelli’s understanding and use of the concept of umori in his major political works.

III. Umori and the Structure of the Principality
The first eleven chapters of The Prince, as everyone knows, deal with three structurally different types of principality—the hereditary, the mixed, and the new. A good deal of interpretative effort is spent on the means involved in acquiring and maintaining power in each of these types—customs, tradition, virtu, fortuna, wickedness, fortunate astuteness, etc. But such interpretative concerns should not obscure the fact that Machiavelli also requires from his readers a concern for the structural issues facing principalities. Preservation of the status quo is of course the concern of hereditary princes. Respect for customs and traditions, and being loved by “his own” (sua)—which presumably include the grandi and the populo—would be sufficient here. The satisfaction that even a hereditary prince must provide is made easy by observance of customs and traditions respecting the status of the two social classes.

The concern of mixed and new principalities is of course innovation or renovation. Hence the prince should know who his “friends” and “enemies” are; which humour he should purge and which he should support. Both innovation and renovation mean a restructuring of the relationship of the classes towards the prince: he has to make the rich poor, and poor rich as David did (Discourses 1, 26). Understood in terms of umori, he has to decide which class to satisfy. And here lies the difficulty. For the innovator has for “enemies” all those who are satisfied with the status quo; he has as “lukewarm friends” all those who are in favour of change but not certain that changes would satisfy them (The Prince 6, 265). Machiavelli speaks of two “natural and normal difficulties” facing all actions of innovation and renovation. The first is that men are ready for innovation because of their “hope” of improving their material conditions, but they are deceived in this because they “see later by experience that they have done worse.” The second difficulty is that the innovator is often obliged to harm not only his “enemies,” the defenders of status quo, but also his “friends,” the promoters of change, because he cannot “satisfy them to the extent that they have presupposed that he would satisfy them,” because he is often obliged to use “strong medicine” against them (3, 254). In brief, each instance of innovation or renovation has to deal with its own grandi and its own populo, and only a most excellent innovator would know which class he should side with and at the same time carry out
the innovation successfully. The theory of humours helps us to realize that class realignment is an essential part of innovation.

The key to understanding Machiavelli's analysis of mixed principalities, as is well known, is his comparative study of France and Turkey, particularly the relationship of the kings of these countries to their social classes. Turkey is an absolute monarchy; it has no hereditary grandi; their place is taken up by administrators of sanjaks, who are dependent entirely on the will of the Sultan. The most powerful political humour of Turkey is the army, not the administrators of sanjaks nor the people. Hence the Sultan is forced to satisfy the army rather than the people: "he must maintain their (the army's) friendship without regard to the people" (4 and 19).

In France, by contrast, the grandi have customary rights not derived from the king; in fact they are the rivals of the king for the throne. Moreover, there is strong antipathy between the grandi and the people: the people hate and fear the grandi, and the king beats down the latter, and favour the former, not directly but through the parliament (4).

It is because of these structural differences, asserts Machiavelli, that it is easy to conquer France but difficult to keep it, and difficult to defeat Turkey, but easy to keep it.

Structural factors also help us to understand why in setting up their respective mixed principalities Alexander succeeded and Louis XII failed. Alexander succeeded because he understood the structure of Darius' empire: it resembled, says Machiavelli, that of the Sultan. Once Alexander was able to defeat the Persian army, he was free to create his own grandi and to establish a healthy relationship with the people in the new territory. Louis XII, by contrast, did not, apparently understand the structural matters. He lost Milan as quickly as he gained it. To be sure, Louis XII committed six other errors, in military and foreign policies, brilliantly analysed in chapter 3. But his fundamental error was that he did not know whom to satisfy and how to, in Milan. He did not obtain the support of the Milanese. For, asserts Machiavelli, even the strongest armies count for nothing if the new prince cannot win over the support of the inhabitants: "Always, even though a new prince may have the strongest of armies, he always needs the support of the inhabitants when moving into a new province" (3, 258).

Turning now to the new principality, we see once again Machiavelli's acute awareness of the importance of structural issues. In the analysis of the new princes he mentions in the book—Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, Borgia, Agathocles, Hiero, Liverotto, Ferdinand of Aragon—there are always pointed references to the societies and classes they had to deal with. Thus Moses found the "people of Israel" in Egypt, enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians. This oppression and enslavement disposed them to follow Moses in order to get out of their servitude. Cyrus needed to find the Persians malcontent with the Medes, and the Medes soft and effeminate through long peace. Theseus could not have demonstrated his virtue if he had not found the Athe-
rians dispersed (6). Borgia’s greatest achievement was the pacification of Romagna. This was achieved by the destruction of the signori and gentiluomini of that region, and by satisfying the people, who came to love and fear him (7). Agathocles had to kill “the senators and the richest of the people” of Sicily (8). Hiero had to eliminate “the old army” and to create a “new one,” and replaced “old friends” with new ones: these were the “foundations” on which he could build “any building” (6). Liverotto of Fermo had to kill all “the leading men” (primi uomini) of Fermo (8). Ferdinand of Aragon innovated Spain by keeping the grandi of Castille “preoccupied” with wars so that they would not interfere with his innovation at home, and he could ultimately gain “reputation and control” over them. Besides, he satisfied the army with the money from the Church and the people. Finally, the expulsion of the Marranos, an unparalleled act of “pious cruelty,” was popular with every class of Spaniards (21).7

All the foregoing examples of new princes stress violence as the means of restructuring society. What distinguishes the civic principality from the other principalities is the relative lack of violence in dealing with the grandi and the populo. But structurally, there is no major difference between any of these new principalities. In the civic principality what is needed is neither “virtue altogether” (tutta virtu) nor “fortune altogether” (tutta fortuna) but what he calls “fortune astuteness” (astuzia fortunata). Fortunate astuteness, it seems, is an ability to judge pragmatically which political humour is the more powerful in a given society at a given time. In the Italy of his day, Machiavelli believed, the populo had become more powerful than the grandi; therefore it would have been a matter of fortunate astuteness for a new prince of Italy to side with the populo. For these pragmatic and historical reasons, The Prince prefers the people over the grandi.

The importance of social classes does not escape Machiavelli’s eyes even in his analysis of a relatively unique principality like the papal state. (It is acquired neither by virtu nor fortuna; their princes keep their power, however they act and live; it has states, but does not need defense; has subjects who are not alienated from their rulers, etc.) (11). Nevertheless when it comes to the analysis of its power, it is done in terms of the grandi of Rome, viz., the Orsini and the Colonna. The power of the church varied with the power of these grandi; it was only by putting them down that Alexander VI and Julius II were able to assert the church’s temporal power.

The concern for the structural aspects of innovation is brought to its grand finale in chapter 24 where Machiavelli asks why Italian princes lost their state? The first reason is a “common failure of their armies,” considered at length in chapters 12–14. The second reason, however, was their failure to deal adequately with their grandi and their populo: “we see that some of them either suffered hostility from the populo or, if the populo were friendly to them, did not know how to secure themselves against the grandi. Without these defects, princes do not lose their states if they are astrong enough to
keep an army in the field” (24, 294).

Which of these causes was the more fundamental one? Since a satisfied populo is the foundation of a good citizen army, it should be inferred that the ultimate reason for Italy’s political corruption was failure of its princes to compose the political humours of their principalities. By inference, again, the task before the new prince of Italy would be to understand the nature of political humours and to take measures accordingly to restore the Italian body politic to its natural health.

IV. Umori and Ethics in The Prince

We now turn to a consideration of the ethical implications of the theory of political humours in The Prince. They can be summed up perhaps in one word: satisfaction. Innovation and renovation in The Prince are to be judged by their ability to provide for a lasting satisfaction to the dominant social class concerned. The ethical questions of liberality and stinginess, love and fear, cruelty and mercy, hatred and contempt are all approached from this perspective: would they contribute to the satisfaction of the dominant class, and thereby to the security of the prince and the state? Satisfying the humours of the dominant political class and the security of the power of the prince are inseparable, mutually dependent, phenomena.

Thus Machiavelli recommends stinginess in place of liberality because it will keep the people satisfied (16). For liberality requires, according to Machiavelli, avarice and lavishness with the subjects’ money. It means higher taxes which the people never like. Liberality therefore will make the prince “hateful to his subjects.” It will benefit only the few, while it will injure the many. Stinginess, on the other hand, even though a vice, is preferable to liberality because ultimately it will produce more satisfaction to the people.

The question of whether it is better to be loved or feared is answered in the same way (17). To be feared is politically a better situation than to be loved, because one is loved, according to Machiavelli, on one’s lover’s term, whereas one is feared on one’s own term. And it is possible to combine being feared and being not hated so long as one is respectful of what people love most, namely property and honour.

Cruelty, too, is judged on the basis of its political utility, measured in terms of its capacity to satisfy the people. Cruelty “well used” is that which a prince does all at once and which “transmutes into the greatest possible benefit to his subjects” (8, 270).

Finally, hatred and contempt also are evaluated to terms of their political utility. The worst threat to a new prince is that he is hated by the “universale,” and the greatest security of the prince, is “the benevolence of the people” (19, 285). The famous analysis in chapter 19 of the emperors of the Roman principate is used by Machiavelli to confirm the above points: that chapter as it were connects ethics to the theory of humours in a deliberate way.
As a matter of historical fact, the Roman principate had to deal with, three, not two, political humours: those of the grandi, the people, and the army (soldati). "This difficulty was so great that it caused the ruin of many emperors, since they could not satisfy both the soldiers and the people" (19, 286). Those who succeeded in satisfying the soldiers succeeded in securing their own power, even though this required oppressing the people. "This decision was necessary," he writes approvingly, "since princes cannot escape being hated by some one, they should seek first not to be hated by any large groups, and if they cannot attain this, they should make every effort to escape the hatred of the most powerful group" (Ibid.). This, then, is Machiavelli's final position in The Prince on the ethical aspect of the theory of humours: satisfy the most influential humour of the realm. It does not matter whether its demands are just or immoral or inhuman. So long as they have political support, the prince should satisfy them. More, the prince should go so far as to adapt himself to the humour of the dominant group. He must enter into their evil ways: "Therefore, as I said above, if a prince wishes to keep his state, he is often forced to be not good, because when that group (universale)—whether the populo or the army or the grandi—which you decide you need to maintain yourself, is corrupt, you have to adapt yourself to its humour (umore) in order to satisfy it" (19, 287).

Here we find the clearest evidence of the connection that exists between the theory of humours and Machiavellian ethics. The prince must follow the humour of the dominant class, even if that class is the epitome of corruption, cruelty, oppression, as were the soldati in the Roman principate. We see here that the notion of umori is also linked to the idea of "acquiring the power to be not good." Machiavelli had introduced this notorious idea in chapter 15: "it is necessary for a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be not good, and to use this knowledge and not use it according to necessity." It is reintroduced in chapter 19, in the context of the theory of humours. "Learning to be not good" means, according to chapter 19, adapting oneself to the humours of the corrupt dominant class. Finally, the notion of umori also throws some light on what Machiavelli means by necessity. Satisfying a humour, in ancient medical science, is a matter of natural necessity, not moral choice. A humour implies organic necessity. Applied to body politic, the implication is that the satisfaction of political humours too should follow the law of organic necessity.

It is instructive in this regard to study closely the major example that Machiavelli uses in chapter 19 to illustrate how the Roman emperors satisfied the humours of the army. The example in question is Septimus Severus, a "very savage lion," and a "very tricky fox." His actions, notes Machiavelli, displayed the persona of the lion and the fox, i.e., his behaviour approximated, as far as human behaviour could approximate, animalistic ferocity and cunning. Action dictated by temperament, but not governed by rational restraint, is what we see in Machiavelli's description of Severus. And
he portrays his actions as the actions of "a great man." His virtues, writes Machiavelli, "made him so admirable in the sight of the army and the people that the latter remained astonished and stupefied, while the former were reverent and satisfied" (Ibid.). Here we find, then, at least one description of Machiavellian virtues: virtues are activities that flow from an actor who has adapted his behaviour to the umore of a corrupt social class. There is, therefore, a link between Machiavellian virtu and the notion of umore.

It appears, then, that according to Machiavelli, the body politic has no higher end to attend to than the satisfaction of the pre-moral, appetitive, needs of social classes. In traditional political theory, it may be noted, princes and statesmen were obliged not only to provide for society's pre-moral needs, but also to do so within the bounds of phronesis, the rule of reason, i.e. reason understood in the Platonic/Aristotelian sense. The body politic was never viewed in exclusively humoral terms: whatever pre-moral ends it served, it had nevertheless to prepare men for a life of virtue. But Machiavelli, through the theory of humours, introduces the idea that the real ends of politics are basically pre-moral and pre-rational. Humours demand a naturalistic ethic. 8

In conclusion, it is beyond dispute that the theory of political humours underlying The Prince enables one to understand the point that satisfying the appetites of the dominant class is inseparable from the problem of innovation. It also highlights the naturalistic character of the ethics that goes with it. Finally, it gives us one way of distinguishing between The Princes and the Discourses: in the former, a case for satisfying the dominant political humour through the agency of the prince is made; in the latter the argument rather is that the political humours of both classes should be satisfied through the instrumentality of ordini. To this extent the theory of political humours present in The Prince is not exactly the same as that found in the Discourses.

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NOTES

1 Chiappelli 78 makes a brief mention of umori. No extensive treatment of umori is attempted by Chiappelli. He seems to locate the meaning of umori in the will of a group. The notion of will applied to umori is perhaps misleading, since umori refers to something pre-rational, and therefore not voluntary. If by will is understood a faculty capable of free choice, then the notion of umori cannot conveniently be attached to it.

2 The theory of humours goes back to Hippocratic sources. See Hippocrates. Galen was its great exponent. Interest in ancient medical literature was one of the major features of the Renaissance in Italy.

3 Discourses, 1. Preface. References to the texts of Machiavelli are to Machiavelli, Tutte le opere. For the English version of the text of The Prince, I have normally followed Mansfield's translation.

4 Tommasini 2, 38–40, has noted that Machiavelli's chancery colleagues such as Marcello Virgilio were well acquainted with the alliance between medicine and philosophy. He rightly assumes that Machiavelli was well acquainted with the medical theories prevalent in Florence.
The so-called ‘dispute’ between medicine and law had a long standing history in humanistic circles. See Salutati, Lockwood, Thorndike, Science and Thought, especially ch. 2, which deals with “Medicine vs Law at Florence”; also in his “De Complexionibus,” Thorndike gives an account of the unpublished manuscripts of the Renaissance period available in the libraries of Oxford, Florence, the Vatican, on the subject of the four humours.

5 It is quite legitimate I believe to speak of a theory of humours in Machiavelli. Already Sasso has spoken of a dottrina degli umori in Machiavelli, and of its being fondamentale nelle pagine di Machiavelli 232–233.

6 It is important to realize that the medical theory of umori was a theory of a natural science of the period. The four humours were thought to be causally connected to the operations of the four elements. “Our four bodily humours and their combinations,” wrote Marsilio Ficino, in one of his letters, “also undergo this rapid (natural) change. Hence the peak of bodily health is considered, as it was by Hippocrates, to be very deceptive. In Nature, of course, descent quite uninterruptedly follows ascent. What was swiftly flowered, quickly withers” (2, 7). Marsilio was a major figure writing in the field of Renaissance medicine, and a teacher of, among others, Marcello Virgilio, Machiavelli’s colleague in the chancery. Machiavelli has transferred to his political theory something of the naturalism proper to the medical theory.

7 It is instructive to note that historians even as late as the middle of the last century should use the concepts of health and humours, in writing about the expulsion of the Marranos from Spain: “we must take into view the actual position of the Jews at that time. Far from forming an integral part of the commonwealth, they were regarded as alien to it, as a mere excrecence, which, so far from contributing to the healthful action of the body politic, was nourished by its vicious humours, and might be lopped off at any time when the health of system demanded it” (Prescott 2, 148). Italics not in the original.

8 Chabod’s authority also may be invoked in support of Machiavelli naturalistic ethic. Machiavelli, says Chabod 213, was influenced by naturalismo del Rinascimento. The state for Machiavelli is a natural organism that has its birth, growth, illnesses, decline and death like any other natural organism.

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