What is a political error? How can we distinguish a political error from other kinds of error? Is there any specificity of the kind of errors that can be made in politics? More precisely, if emotions and affects play a key role in politics, one shall suspect that they may also play a role in political errors. Is it possible to define more clearly the nature of this role and, hence, the nature of political error? Is it possible to depict phenomenologically the way through which rational arguments interfere with emotional motives and, conversely, the way through which emotions shape rationality in politics? A better knowledge of what is specific in political errors might thus help to understand the relationships between reason and emotions, concepts of rationality and "structures of feelings".

Although political errors are likely to be as old as politics itself, it is only in modern times – and I will suggest that it is only with Machiavelli – that the notion of political error clearly emerged on the background of other kinds of errors with which it has long been mingled. In an article entitled *Morality and the social sciences*, Albert Hirschman analysed the connection between morality and politics[1]. He shows that there is a durable tension between the two. He writes: "modern political science owes a great deal to Machiavelli's shocking claim that ordinary notions of moral behaviour for individual may not be suitable as rules for conduct for states." Such an analysis invites to go back to the distinction between the different kinds of errors that can be done by humans with the goal of identifying the nature of those that can be specifically called "political errors".

Outline of the article

I will proceed as follow: I will first make a brief "history of error", if one can say so. More precisely, I will try to identify a few steps that have been gone through in the thinking about what an error can be in general. I will show that one can distinguish four kinds of error. Namely the perceptual error, the conceptual error, the moral error and, finally, the political error. The distinction is not controversial for the three first groups. The fourth kind of errors, however, is a controversial issue. Indeed, when it comes to political error, some commentators claim that it does not has to be confused with moral errors; others claim right the opposite, thus that political errors are only a certain variety of moral error. This is showing, at least, that the notion of political error is still not well characterized.

In a second moment, and in order to shed some light on the question, I will assume that the distinction between moral and political error is relevant and I will thus try to define more precisely what a political error is as opposed to other varieties of errors and, more specifically, as opposed to moral errors. Thus, I will try to assess the nature of political errors. I will exhibit a few distinctive features of political errors showing that their difference with other kinds of errors is not of a speculative sort but that it actually corresponds to facts.

Finally, I will turn to the question of why assessing the nature of political error can be helpful if one wonder to find ways of modifying affects. Narrating stories is, I will show, a powerful way of intervening into political issues. This is where phenomenology comes about: it will show how narratives matter when it comes to political passions. I will thus try to analyse how narratives and, more generally, history, can change the shape of affects of political significance and, in some cases, avoid political errors.

A history of error

So let me with the history of the notion of error. I speak here of notion of error as it has been conceptualized which I distinguish from the fact of simply making an error, the latter being probably as old as humanity itself. Identifying and expressing what is at stake in the making of an error is something different than making an error. It supposes to conceptualize accurately what an error is.

As far back as the fourth century BC, Heraclitus of Ephesus, the Ionian Greek philosopher, would claim that "those who are awake have a world one and common, but those who are asleep each turn aside into their private world"[2]. He seems to mean that humans can live either in illusion or in truth. Here, thus, error is taken as an equivalent of illusion; an interpretation that is confirmed by other fragments from Heraclitus. Under every error, one should be able to identify a corresponding illusion. Illusion, in turn, is conceived in a way that is very similar to what happens when one perceive something and interpret as something that does not correspond to what is actually perceived. The square tower that is perceived as a round tower from a distance would later become the canonical example that

encapsulates this notion of perceptual error. Perceptual errors, however, are not be confused with conceptual errors, as Plato would show, a few decades after Heraclitus.

Indeed, the distinction between perceptual and conceptual errors can be traced back at least to Plato. In the Socratic dialogue entitled *Meno*, Socrates famously show how a young slave can be led to correct by himself his own errors by being guided only by questions[3]. When the young slave says that a square the side of which has been doubled will also have its surface doubled, he makes an error that is clearly not of a perceptual kind. One can thus distinguish at least two kinds of errors which can be called perceptual errors and conceptual errors. If a distinction has to be made between these two kinds of errors, other kinds of errors might have to be recognized as well.

Aristotle, in *Nicomachean ethics* and in the *Politics* would precisely identify a third kind of error which deals specifically, he would explain, with the consequence of having incorrectly anticipated the future. Someone who, by his attitude, provoke consequences that he was not expecting is making an error which cannot be qualified as perceptual. It cannot be qualified as a conceptual error either. Rather, it is again a new sort of error that is to be found both in moral and in politics, Aristotle would claim.

When I do something that I later regret, I make a moral error. When a politician or group of people decide something that would later lead to a catastrophe (a war for instance), one can call it a "political error". At a first sight, such an error does not have a structure that differ from the moral error since it results from the failure to foresee the consequences of our actions. And that will be what Aristotle would conclude. In moral error, as well as in political error, the failure lie in the fact that the future has been incorrectly foreseen. In other terms, from Aristotle on, moral error and political will be characterised as being of the same sort.

Aristotle would, for instance write, in the *Politics*, that "governing is being able to see what the future will be"[4]. Therefore, not being able to see correctly what the future will be is making a political error. By the same token, not being able to anticipate the consequence of an act would constitute the basis of the moral error as it is analysed in the *Nicomachean ethics.* Thus, political and moral errors are here analysed in the same way. In fact, the two categories are considered as only one category.

This link between moral and political errors will have an enduring life. It will be reaffirmed from century to century up to Machiavelli who would disentangle the two notions, probably because he is more concerned with practical thinking (which he famously call *verità effettuale de la cosa*) than by conceptual analysis. In so doing, he is introducing a distinction into the third category of errors which would thus have, at least for those who accept the notions provided by Machiavelli, to be now split into moral errors and political errors instead of being grouped into a single category.

Although the nature of the difference between the two remains obscure at this stage, it appears clearly that the two notions of moral and political should be distinguished when Machiavelli exhorts, for instance, the Prince to keep giving the impression that he is acting with equanimity while he shall, occasionally, have to act otherwise[5]. Equanimity is thus, for Machiavelli, a moral notion that should not be confused with the political usefulness of having the reputation of being so. Being unjust could be a moral mistake, but it can also, sometimes, help to avoid a political mistake.

It is not before the twentieth century that what is at stake under the distinction between moral and political error will begin to be clarified. Hence the fact that from its first publication in 1532, *The Prince* has been considered as a sulphurous reading. Even Leo Strauss, in its *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, first published in 1958, considers that reading Machiavelli exposes to dangerous drawbacks. He would write, for instance: "We do not hesitate to assert, as very many have asserted before us, and we shall later on try to prove, that Machiavelli's teaching is immoral and irreligious"[6]. By this he means that, at the end of the Middle Ages, claiming that moral and politics can be disentangled is, in itself, a moral error. This might be the reason that make the issue so controversial. Let's turn back, for a minute, to the arguments that lead Machiavelli to separate the two notions.

The *Prince* is composed as advices to Lorenzo de Medici the second and is supposed to help him stay in power. The advises provided by Machiavelli are mainly, if not exclusively, oriented through one goal which is to answer a question that could be summed up as follow: "how should the Prince, the sovereign, act in order to avoid that his former friends turn into enemies?" Therefore, turning friend into enemies is also what would characterize a political error according to Machiavelli. One discovers that one has made a political mistake when someone who used to be a friend turn to be an enemy. Let us take this as a first definition of

the political error.

Such a definition does not apply to moral error since in moral error, one possibly become the enemy of oneself, but one does not necessarily turn someone against oneself. Thus, although, as Aristotle already noticed, both moral and political errors share the failure to foresee the future, they do it in quiet different ways. In political errors, what is at stake is the risk, for any action, to make friends become enemies while in moral error, what is at stake is, so to say, the risk to become its own enemy by having to judge oneself with poor favour. A political error has to deal with the anticipation of how others would react to our initiatives.

From there on, two schools of thought would appear. One of them will stick to the Aristotelian idea that a political error is a kind of moral error. The other one, following Machiavelli, will try to identify more clearly what is specific in a political error.

Assessing political errors

By turning to two examples, I will try to define the specificity of political error more clearly, thus assuming that this last opinion makes sense.

The first example will deal with a stunning episode of the recent French political live. The former French president François Hollande, who was then finishing what would turn to be his unique mandate, published a book, that in fact had been written by two journalists, which title was: *A president shouldn't say this*[7]. Indeed, the book could not have a better title since it was, as it would be mentioned by many observers as well as by policy makers including a large number of members of its own party, a great political mistake. In this book, he was, quite honestly, explaining what he did all along its mandate. Honesty could hardly be depicted as a moral mistake. But it could easily generate political mistakes. That was what happened in this occasion. The mistake was so great that his own first minister decided to run for presidency and that, finally, he himself, although President, would decide even not to try to run for presidency because, he declared "XXX". That will open an avenue for his former minister of economy, a person whose name was Emmanuel Macron (who, by

the way, did validate, a few years earlier, a degree on political sciences with a memoir on Machiavelli).

So what was the political mistake that François Hollande did with this book? The answer has been anticipated by Machiavelli: he turned many of his former friends into enemies. One should note that the nature of politics entailed by this notion of error is not the same as the one proposed by Carl Schmitt who, as it is well known, focuses on the distinction between friends and enemies[8]. Here, what is at stake is not to distinguish friends from enemies but rather to anticipate what would make the former turn into the latter. It is a different sort of distinction that also opens different perspectives.

Since affects circulate in friends in a way different than they circulate in enemies, turning friends into enemies is the equivalent of turning supporting feelings into destroying feelings. As one can see on the example of François Hollande, the effect that he obtained with his book turned to be right the opposite to what he was looking for. It was supposed to enhance the number of its supporters; it turned out that it decreased this number.

Similar mechanisms operate, although at a much higher rate, in the burst of a revolution. This is what happened, and this is the second example, in Iran a few decades ago leading to the resignation, in 1979, of the King of Iran, the so-called Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Palavhi[9].

A few years before the revolution, the Shah of Iran decided to organize a sumptuous celebration of its regime. The goal was to deepens its power by appearing at the top of an unchallenged legitimacy. He obtained, however, the directly opposite effect: his opponents infuriate while his proponents did not agree with such magnificent and expensive celebrations. The result was that the Islamic revolution, that arose a few years later, would push him away with the help of the citizen of Iran. He had accumulated a vast number of haters by the ways that, he thought, would be appropriate to consolidate his power.

Thus, we can now define more clearly what a political error is: *it is an error made on evaluating the consequences of what others think about what one do or say.* If I do or say something, I have also to deal with what people think about it. A political error will arise if I fail to anticipate correctly that reaction. Although it can be helpful to provide criteria to

distinguish what a political error can be, it is again more helpful to provide some clue that could help to prevent political mistakes.

Correcting political error

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his *Note on Machiavelli*, published in *Signes* in 1960, did notice rightly that what exposes *The Prince* to error is that what he does or say is always seen in a plurality of ways[10]. Since the Prince is exposed to the judgment of a variety of persons, his action will also be judged in a variety of ways. Anticipating the reaction of a crowd must thus depend on a specific sense of evaluation which is not the same as the one that one can have in front of a single or of a few well identified persons. The politician is judged by a crowd of ways of seeing instead of by only a few. And each of them is affected differently by what he is doing. How to anticipate the variations that could arise in such a crowd?

To answer this question, Machiavelli uses essentially one a tool. This tool is history. He would provide advises to the Prince by looking back to what happened to others in various situation, as I just did with the example of François Hollande and of the Shah of Iran. This manner of reasoning is pointing to the nature not so much of history than of politics. Machiavelli was not an historian and did not pretend to be one. What he was doing with history is of a different kind.

Indeed, he is attempting to shape the affects of Lorenzo de Medici the second to help him avoiding some mistakes that would lead his reign to a catastrophe. That is the way through which, pragmatically, Machiavelli is seeing history. History, in other word, is, for him, a tool that is efficient to shape politically meaningful affects. And, as such, history can be useful to prevent political errors.

This is suggesting ways of using history to reshape the affects that are significant for politics which are love or, at least, respect and hate or, at least, disrespect. As I tried to show, there are ways to turn someone from respect to disrespect as with the case of Hollande) or, in the opposite way, from disrespect to respect. A political error can thus be analysed in terms of lack of historical culture. The historical culture, as Machiavelli means

it, is a tool suitable to avoid political errors.

But is it possible to correct a political mistake with history and how does such a correction work? Most of the time, when one speaks about the use of history for political purposes, one has in mind the way through which one can learn things from the past by avoiding errors that were previously done.

For instance, in the financial crisis, in 2008, many commentators did suggest looking back at the Great Depression crisis of 1929 to avoid the mistakes that were then made. Policy makers claimed that they have "learned the lessons from the past". Such examples can explain why people would act differently when similar circumstances arise. Of course, the circumstances are never exactly the same. Therefore, the historical relevance of a given reference will generally be subject to a critical evaluation. The American historian of economy Barry Eichengreen has shown convincingly, in a book on use and misuse of history, that although the lessons of 1929 have been taken into account, new errors were also made, presumably because the model of the 1929 crisis served too much as a basis for thinking about what should be decided[11]. This represent a conventional use of history in politics. It represents a part of what Machiavelli suggests when he turns to history. But only a part of it.

Machiavelli would indeed go one step farther in its investigation of the power of history and narration because he is not only concerned by right actions but also by affects. Could turning hatred into more pacific affects be achieved by history and by narration, as it should be expected if the analysis of Machiavelli turned out to be correct? I will give a single example showing how political affects, i.e. mainly hate and disrespect, can be modified through narration. A narration can therefore reshape affects and turn disrespect into respect.

To show this, I would like to narrate a story that took place in the XIXth century in the city of La Rochelle, on the Atlantic seaside in France. It shows the connections between narrating a story and triggering a change in the way affects are circulating. La Rochelle then harboured an important military place which was located right in the middle of the city. As it is usually the case for official buildings, one could find a national flag, thus a blue white and red flag, floating on the roof. A friend of the French historian Edgar Quinet who

was living in the neighbourhood had an apartment the windows of which opened right in front of the flag in such a way that he was seeing the flag every time he was looking through its windows. He did not like this view because, he said, the flag has a military flavour he was disliking. Edgar Quinet told him the meaning of the flag, explaining that the French flag has its own history and meaning: his three colours, blue, white and red, were chosen to symbolized the people from Paris surrounding the king. Indeed, the colour of the king's flag was the white, while the colour of the city of Paris is the blue and the red.

Once Edgar Quinet told the story to his friend, who was of Parisian origins, the feelings of the latter changed dramatically: "how nice, he said, I will love this flag now!" This is showing what narrating a story could do in political affects. Narrating a story is not something neutral which would only give information from the past. It is something that act in a much deeper fashion. It affects the way we are related to things. It should be noticed that it is not achieving this goal by preaching the goal it intends to reach but rather by exposing facts that are, in a sense, much more than simple facts. A story is made by the narration of facts, but it conveys affects (and effects) of political significance since it can turn hate into love.

This phenomenological analysis, provided by an historian, shows what can be achieved with the simple narration of an history. Narrating an history could, at a first sight, seem to be a very neutral process which deals with transmitting facts. But when one looks more phenomenologically at what is it at stake in narration and in the process of hearing a narration, one discovers that the it conveys the power to trigger new regimen of affects that can, in certain cases, make them useful to avoid political errors. Here, arguments and affects interact in such a way that they are tightly intertwined.

Conclusion

Since there are ways to shape political affects, it is still more important to distinguish political error from other kind of errors. Political affects can be efficiently changed by the narration of history, as I have tried to show. It means that beside history, there is another topic that deserve a close attention which the usage of history in politics. This should

constitute a sub-discipline as such since it is an essential topic when it comes to political errors. In other terms, to investigate more thoroughly what a political error is, one should look carefully at how history is working when one listen to it.

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