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Review - Martin Wight on Fortune and Irony in Politics

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LUCA G. CASTELLIN, FEB 8 2017

Martin Wight on Fortune and Irony in Politics
by Michele Chiaruzzi
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

'The word fortune describes the most ancient and fundamental experience in politics' (p. 79). In this simple, yet authoritative way, the ambiguous and enigmatic Martin Wight opens one of his essays, written in the late fifties. After almost sixty years confined in the LSE's archive, "Fortune's Banter" resurfaced from the oblivion thanks to the meticulous work of Michele Chiaruzzi, who put back together the original typewritten document and the corrective manuscript. Chiaruzzi's *Martin Wight on Fortune and Irony in Politics* is a useful addition to the careful analysis given by Ian Hall, in *The International Thought of Martin Wight* (2006). Moreover, the book offers a new and interesting contribution to the discovery of a fundamental author, not only for the English school, but also for the entire discipline of International Relations.

Wight's intent is to disperse the shadows hovering around the comprehension of the relationship between ideas and action in politics. That is the reason why the volume represents a strict critique to political dogmatism and highlights the importance of imponderable elements on human affairs. On the other hand, it also represents a clear reaffirmation of the validity of the 'classical approach' in studying the current political situation, especially the international one. With the awareness of 'men and happenings are recalcitrant to purposeful guidance, that the results of political action never square with intention' and that the politician 'never can have command of all the relevant material' (p. 79), Wight accompanies the reader through a fascinating journey, between great thinkers who reflected on the inconsistency of politics and politicians who experienced the contradictions of political processes. From Aristotle to Dante, from Polibio to Bolingbroke, going through statesmen, ambassadors, diplomatic officials, the book retraces – in a rapid yet logical dialogue with Niccolò Machiavelli – history's intricate path, to highlight the effect of tragedy and irony on political experience.

Wight mainly focuses his attention on questioning the possibility of providing a causal explanation to political phenomena. From this point of view, the author's opinion stands as the complete opposite of what, in the same years, is supported by behaviourists. Wight, in fact, thinks that human vicissitudes originate from a maze of unpredictable variables. This is the reason why he criticises the different variations of determinism. However, he doesn't deny that political studies can discover some constant 'regularities'. Still, these regularities consist also – if not only – of the recurring remerging of the unpredictable, of the uncertain, of the paradoxical. In other words, as noticed by Chiaruzzi, 'the urgency lies not in uncovering alleged eternal laws of politics', but 'in understanding the magnitude of margins of freedom that the historical process grants to political agents' (p. 25). For this reason, Wight's work never lost its value, even many years later. This, however, doesn't imply that the attempts to predict future international politics' scenarios, even resorting to mathematical models, are useless. Instead, it means that we cannot forget that politics is, and will always be, uncertainty's realm.

Wight is in fact aware that political reality cannot be forced to be something merely rational, because it goes much further than that. It's in the ups and downs, so in the upturning of the events, that fortune exercises its action on the flow of historical occurrences, overturning men and nations' destiny, because (as the author wants to highlight) is mainly the international political experience which builds the stage in which fortune operates.

"Fortune's Banter", as Chiaruzzi emphasises, underlines that 'the challenge of politics remains irreconcilable in many rough edges: the effort of theory and the unknown of practice' (p. 76). In a situation of uncertainty and crisis, reading *Martin Wight on Fortune and Irony in Politics* could not only represent, for politicians and not, an appropriate recall to the awareness of contingencies, but also a useful incentive to take action. Moreover, it could be, for the younger and more daring International Relations' scholars, an ironic sign from Fortune itself, seducing them to deepen their study of an author like Martin Wight. In fact, as underlined by Machiavelli in the XXV chapter of *The Prince*, 'Fortune is a woman', and 'it is clear that she more often allows herself to be won over by impetuous men than by those who proceed coldly. And so, like a woman, Fortune is always the friend of young men, for they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity'.

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