

## **How dirty can democratic hands get?**

Although liberal moralist theories have never fully tackled it, the dirty-hands problem has always been taken into account in the tradition of political realism. From Machiavelli's *Prince*, this problem has forced philosophers to deal with the 'irrationality of the world' (in Weber's terms) and to appreciate the distinction lying between purely moral and political domains.

Richard Bellamy, then, is not the first theorist who confronts himself with this issue, when he claims that (1) it can be correctly approached only in a realist tradition that does not plan to sanitize politics and that (2) democracy puts some strong constraints on the Prince's available dirty actions. However, whereas Bellamy rightly points out the failure of moral idealism at imposing a single conception of justice as a frame of the political debate, he does not give a convincing account neither of the two consequences of such a failure nor of democracy's specificity in successfully constraining the Machiavellian Prince.

In this paper I claim that the reasons of these shortcomings depend on three considerations Bellamy seems to overlook. First of all, he gives an ambiguous account of democratic hypocrisy, since the same hypocrisy that he regards as an intrinsic flaw of moral idealism turns out to be one of the major strengths of a realist democracy. Second, he includes within a democratic system a patronizing conception of politicians who know and pursue the public interest better than the citizens who elected them. I suggest that this sort of conception is highly controversial and inconsistent with any thorough conception of democracy. Finally, I claim that Bellamy's problems stem from his unspecified conception, in this article, of what is distinctively 'political' in democratic political life.