

Award-winning novelist Gianrico Carofiglio is the author of novels, short stories and essays. His books have sold six million copies and have been translated or are going to be translated all over the world. Twitter: @GianricoCarof



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GIANRICO CAROFIGLIO

Della gentilezza e del coraggio

Breviario di politica e altre cose

Of Kindness and Courage

A compendium of politics and other things



Gianrico Carofiglio

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A compendium of politics and other things

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About the essay

Legend has it that a Japanese physician once observed that, unlike the other trees in his garden, the branches of the weeping willow did not snap under the weight of the snow. Instead of remaining rigid, they simply yielded to their burden, letting the snow slide off their branches. Their strength lay not in opposing the force of the snow but in embracing it and consequently defusing it. He applied this principle to martial arts and ju-jitsu was born.

It is this same philosophy of yielding, effortlessness and grace that writer Gianrico Carofiglio brings together in the word *kindness*, presenting it as an alternative response to counter-attack in the field of modern politics. As a way of disempowering your opponent and thereby defusing an aggressive situation. Kindness becomes a powerful weapon that creates instead of destroying.

A powerful ally of kindness is *courage*: the courage to ask questions that engender more questions, the courage to accept a state of uncertainty which keeps your mind open and flexible, rather than cast-iron certainty which shuts off any hope of progress and possibilities. The courage to demand transparency and

accountability in politics. In other words, the courage to be a mindful, responsible citizen and not a subject. Last, but not least, the courage of humour and self-deprecation.

Della gentilezza e del coraggio (Of Kindness and Courage) is a compendium of principles and methods for the practice of politics and civic responsibility, to encourage a society of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Written with Gianrico Carofiglio's trademark incisiveness and lexical precision, it is a book that subverts assumptions and challenges limitations. A book that never claims to provide the answers but, instead, champions the art of questioning. A must-have mini-manual for the thinking citizen – and politician.

About the author

Gianrico Carofiglio was born in Bari and has worked for many years as a prosecutor specializing in organized crime. He was appointed advisor of the anti-Mafia committee in the Italian Parliament in 2007 and served as a senator from 2008 to 2013. He is the author of the novels featuring the character of the defense lawyer Guido Guerrieri: *Testimone inconsapevole* (*Involuntary Witness*, 2002), *Ad occhi chiusi* (*A Walk in the Dark*, 2003, Best International Noir of the year 2007 in Germany), *Ragionevoli dubbi* (*Reasonable Doubts*, 2006), *Le perfezioni provvisorie* (*Temporary Perfections*, 2010, Premio Selezione Campiello), *La regola dell'equilibrio* (*A Fine Line*, 2014), *La misura del tempo* (*The Measure of Time*, 2019, Premio Strega 2020 finalist). Officer of the Carabinieri Pietro Fenoglio is the protagonist of another series of novels: *Una mutevole verità* (*A Shifting Truth*, 2014, Premio Scerbanenco), *L'estate fredda* (*The Cold Summer*, 2016), *La versione di Fenoglio* (*Fenoglio's Version*, 2019).

Among his fiction and non fiction works: *Il passato è una terra straniera* (*The Past is a Foreign Land*, 2004, Premio Bancarella 2005), adapted into an internationally awarded film, *Né qui né altrove* (*Neither Here Nor Elsewhere. A Night in Bari*, 2009), *Non esiste saggezza* (*There*

is No Wisdom, 2010, 2020), *La manomissione delle parole* (*Manumitting Words*, 2010), *Il silenzio dell'onda* (*The Silence of the Wave*, 2011, finalist for Premio Strega 2012), *Il bordo vertiginoso delle cose* (*The Vertiginous Edge of Things*, 2013), *La casa nel bosco* (*The House in the Woods*, 2014), written with his brother Francesco, *Con parole precise* (*With exact words*, 2015), *Passeggeri notturni* (*Night Passengers*, 2016), *Le tre del mattino* (*Three O'Clock in the Morning*, 2017), the pamphlet *Con i piedi nel fango* (*Feet in the Mud*, 2018) and *Della gentilezza e del coraggio* (*On Kindness and Courage*, 2020). Many titles are also audiobooks, read by the author. In 2020 was released *L'avvocato Guerrieri*, Gianrico Carofiglio's first audio-series. Gianrico Carofiglio's multi-award winner and best selling books are translated into 27 languages worldwide.

Of Kindness and Courage

A compendium of politics and other things

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Introduction

The term "compendium" refers to a résumé, a catalogue, an inventory, a summary, an overview, or a list of rules. So this book stems from the intention to draft a compendium of rules – or rather suggestions – for the practice of politics and power. Suggestions that relate not so much to the merit of one's choices (even though these are never without influence) as to their method and manner, and how to *proceed*. Or how *not* to proceed. Suggestions relating to the practice of power as well as a critique and supervision *of* power. In other words, the practice of conscious citizenship.

This compendium is therefore a (most atypical) instruction manual for politics and power aimed at those with power – politicians, bureaucrats and magistrates –

but also at those who are apparently without it, in other words the citizens. Us.

There are three basic topics. Kindness as a way of tackling and resolving conflict and a key tool for making sense of human relations. Courage as a fundamental civic virtue and a means of change. The ability to ask and *ask oneself* questions – in other words, the ability to doubt – as the core of critical thinking and consequently of active citizenship.

In order to introduce you to the reading and meaning of this book, it is worth expanding a little further on this third point. What we could call the art of *doubt by questioning* is the touchstone for taking a stand against all forms of murky power practice. Because the quality of democratic life does actually depend on the efficacy of the questions citizens are able to ask.

Asking questions – real questions – is nothing more or less than a subversive activity against any kind of authoritarianism, whether evident or concealed. Democracy and peaceful coexistence are partly, if not primarily, based on being able to keep in check the statements of those in power. To put it another way, on the *visibility* of actual power, a notion explored by Norberto Bobbio, for whom the fundamental principle of the democratic state is precisely the principle of transparency or visible power.

Another no less important aspect emerges from this meditation on the relationship between questions, doubt and the qualities of civic life. Tolerating uncertainty, tolerating error and being ready to admit it are actually basic requirements for a healthy personality and society, as well as a vibrant democracy. These qualities accept the notion that the complexity of the world we live in often

goes beyond our understanding and this very (brave) acceptance is one of the premises of secular, tolerant and effective politics.

On the other hand, societies and cultures characterised by the avoidance of uncertainty, where people feel a need for strict codes of behaviour and thinking so that they can – often artificially – pigeonhole the complexity of reality, cannot make real progress or develop more freedom and intelligence.

Good questions define the object of our focus, our action and our rebellion. In other words, much more than good (or bad) answers shape the world and the future.

The ability to ask good questions – of others as well as of ourselves – is an essential asset of conscious citizens and one of the characteristics that set them apart from

subjects. It's an ability that implies courage and kindness, words on which, in the pages that follow, we will confer meanings that are quite different from the ones we conventionally think of. Meanings we first have to redefine and somehow reconstruct. Therefore, to start with, let's try and work out what we mean when we talk about kindness.

Kindness

Fighting disciplines and Far Eastern martial arts in particular are a rich source of legends, anecdotes and metaphors that often cast a useful light on complex notions. My favourite story is about the origins of jujitsu.

There was a physician called Shirobei Akiyama, who had spent many years studying fighting methods in an attempt to discover the secret of invincibility. He had practised various disciplines and met the best masters but, despite extravagant claims, in every system it was strength, the quality of the weapons or else underhand means that ended up prevailing. This meant that, however much you studied martial arts through assiduous exercise, however strong or prepared you were, you could always come across an adversary who

was stronger or perhaps better armed or more astute, who would defeat you in the end.

One winter's day, when it had been snowing for hours, Akiyama was in his home, sitting by the window. He was looking out, following the thread of his thoughts. The entire landscape was white: the fields, the rocks, the houses. Overloaded, the branches of the cherry trees were breaking, as were those of the oaks. Never had anyone seen such a snowfall. The physician's gaze wandered across the garden to the pond, which was surrounded by weeping willows. The snow was also settling on the willows but no sooner had it accumulated on their branches than they would bend, making it fall to the ground. Unlike the other trees, the willows did not break. As he watched this scene, Akiyama realised he had reached the end of his search. The secret of fighting lay in non-resistance. Those who are yielding overcome

trials; those who are hard and rigid are sooner or later defeated and broken. Sooner or later they find someone stronger. The secret lay in the yielding. *Jutsu* means art; *ju* means yielding, flexibility, kindness. Ju-jitsu means the art of yielding.

The basic principle of ju-jitsu – but also, in different ways, of many martial arts such as judo, aikido, karate and wing chun – has to do with using your opponent's strength to neutralise their attack and, ultimately, eliminate or reduce the violence of the conflict.

If the attacker pushes you, you yield, rotate and make them lose their balance; if the attacker pulls you, you push and equally make them lose their balance. There is no use of unnecessary violence; this neutralising of the attack, this throwing off balance by means of

moving and diverting aggressive force, act as defence but also have a didactic role. They show the opponent kindly – let's say as kindly as possible – that the attack is pointless and harmful and that it rebounds on them. Neutralising the attack does not imply eliminating the opponent.

This principle can easily be applied to the context of dialectical confrontation. [...]

The power of stupidity

Among the various witticisms attributed to Einstein, there is "The mind is like a parachute... It only works if we keep it open." Others attribute this aphorism to a certain Thomas Dewar, a Scottish whisky producer who lived at the turn of the 20th century. The attribution is not particularly important: either way, it's a nice metaphor that helps introduce the topic of this chapter.

In order to manage conflict – and therefore practise good politics – intelligently and productively, it's important, as we've said, to free the mind of assumptions and prejudices. Having a clear mind ready to grasp all the nuances of experience – especially its unexpected turns – allows us to react to complexity quickly.

The first thing that stands in the way of developing this attitude is ordinary obtuseness, plain unconscious incompetence, as described in one of the most famous psychological studies in recent decades.

The so-called "Dunning-Kruger effect" is named after David Dunning and Justin Kruger, psychology researchers at Cornell University. In a study published in 1999, they identified a phenomenon by which the more incompetent we are, the more convinced we are that we are not. These kinds of people not only reach wrong conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence prevents them from realising it.

In actual fact we all overestimate ourselves, but those who are incompetent overestimate themselves even more because they lack *metacognition*: the ability to observe our performance with a critical eye, to come out

of ourselves and observe what we do from outside, and to become aware of the flaws in our performance.

In general, a true expert is capable of realising when he or she is doing something badly. Hemingway used to say that a writer's essential asset is a constantly operating *shit-detector*. It is a fundamental characteristic in every true form of expertise. [...]

The art of conspiracy

On 5 February 2003, the then U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, delivered a speech at the United Nations Security Council about the danger deriving from the alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction on the part of Saddam Hussein's regime and in particular from huge stocks of anthrax (a bacterium that causes a severe and often deadly lung infection).

Powell claimed that Iraq was able to produce about twenty-five thousand litres of anthrax, mentioned a thick secret service dossier on Saddam's biological weapons, talked about mobile labs to manufacture these weapons and showed on a large screen (indistinct) satellite pictures, images and photographs which he said proved the existence of a consistent Iraqi programme for the intensive production of weapons of mass destruction.

Over the months and years that followed, we discovered that most of the information and interpretation provided by Powell to the Security Council was simply false. There were no mobile labs, there was no anthrax, in other words there were no arsenals of weapons of mass destruction.

In February 2005, Powell declared that his speech to the United Nations Security Council – and his presentation of false arguments that had been supplied to him by the American and British secret services – constituted a permanent stain on his career.

Meanwhile, however, the war against Iraq – on the basis of these false arguments and evidence (or rather lack of evidence) – had been unleashed and would provoke a huge number of deaths among American and Iraqi soldiers and, above all, civilians.

The incident of Powell's speech to the Security Council is one of the most glaring modern cases of violation of the burden of proof, with disastrous, tragic and in some ways criminal consequences.

Democracy and international peaceful coexistence partly (if not entirely) rely on our being able to verify statements issued by those who exercise power in its various forms. [...]

Fallacies

We have extensively discussed the violation of the burden of proof, a key argument that connects the topic of incompetence and the rules of correct argument.

It is therefore time to expand our horizons and provide a general definition of fallacies by highlighting the most widespread and dangerous ones, and specify how they work and how they can be neutralised.

Fallacies are (sometimes deliberate, sometimes involuntary) errors in the structure of an argument that invalidate it. They prevent a discussion from progressing in a logical manner, effectively making the conversation useless. They are often used deliberately with the intention of cheating the interlocutor and the public, and occur quite frequently in political debates and in certain kinds of second-rate legal orations.

In many cases, using fallacies is like cheating at gambling: it is deliberate and fraudulent, performed with different kinds of artifice and deception in order to win a contested dialogue by violating the rules.

This category does however include many errors of reasoning that can happen to all of us without our being aware of them, when we talk in a public context or in an everyday setting.

For the purposes of the point made in this chapter, we will list only a few of the most common fallacies in political debates and private discussions, and in no way claim to list them all. [...]

Reasonable discussions

An alternative to manipulative speech, marked by the systematic, more or less conscious use of deceptive arguments, is reasonable discussion, characterised by a respect for rules that are at once ethical and epistemological.

Since the post-War period, it has been increasingly observed that the Cartesian rationale (by which the only thing considered rational is what can be formally proved, in a deductive way, with an obvious, undisputed outcome) is radically inadequate to tackle the topics of civic and political debate or to account for everyday arguments, as well as judicial ones and those relating to natural sciences.

People have noted that anything probable, plausible, uncertain and debatable was left outside the

strict boundaries of formal reasoning – and therefore outside this strict notion of reason.

However, as Chaim Perelman – co-founder, with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, of the New Rhetoric, intended as a method of argumentation – explained, it is only in the field of the debatable and the preferable (excluded from the horizon of formal rationale) that a debate of values takes place. Our choices and actions in fields that are essential for community living, starting with politics, depend on the outcome of this debate. [...]

Humour, a political virtue

In the second chapter we mentioned the Dunning-Kruger effect. As you will recall, it is the phenomenon by which the more incompetent we are, the more convinced we are that we are not. In their studies, the Cornell University researchers noticed that individuals with the lowest scores in grammar, logic and *humour* tests tend to dramatically overestimate their level of ability. This is because they lack metacognition – the ability to view their performance with a critical eye. The practice of metacognition involves being able to come out of ourselves and observe what we do from outside, being aware of the gaps in our knowledge and, therefore, the flaws in our performance.

It is interesting to note, just as in the case of Dunning and Kruger's research, that a lack of a sense of

humour and especially its most important variation, self-deprecation, is a symptom (one of the causes, actually) of an absence of metacognition.

In other words, a lack of a sense of humour is a symptom, but also a cause, of stupidity. It goes hand in hand with radical as well as groundless and often grotesque certainties about ourselves, others and the world. [...]

Courage and fears

Port-Royal Logic is a philosophy textbook by two French Jansenists, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, who published it anonymously in 1662. In this treatise, they set out to study the rules of logic in order to set out the rules of thinking.

The book examines for the first time the subject of asymmetry between fears and dangers. In particular, the authors talk about the fear of lightning and the disproportion between this often acute fear and the objective, extremely low risk of actually being struck by a bolt of lightning.

In the world in which we live – complex and in many ways unfathomable (much more so than in the 17th century) – what many of us believe constitutes danger has little to do with objective danger. This

inclination is twofold: we worry about rather improbable – if not actually non-existent – events and phenomena but, at the same time, take serious risks without any awareness or care.

Fears are often ruled by the frequency and way in which the media mention certain topics, whereas dangers depend on the frequency – unknown in many cases – with which detrimental events occur.

It is one of the paradoxes of humanity, more intense now than in the past. We worry about things which in actual fact represent dangers that are statistically of little importance or are even negligible (plane crashes, criminal attacks, immigration) but which capture the imagination. It's a phenomenon that has been extensively studied by social psychologists in recent decades. This is technically called an "availability bias"

and occurs when we tend to estimate the probability of an event on the basis of the emotional impact of a perception or a memory, rather than on the actual (often ignored) probability of the feared event. [...]

Kindness and sense

"I don't like that man. I must get to know him better" seems to have been one of Abraham Lincoln's favourite maxims. The basic concept is that the fiercest, sometimes unfocused criticism, full of resentment and even hatred, often stems from the inability to understand someone else's point of view. Lincoln's method consisted of listening to the opinions of whoever was criticising him, and then trying and explain his viewpoint. For example, he did this with Frederick Douglass, the most prominent black leader at the time, who, on several occasions, had attacked the President harshly, criticising his "politics of delay and hesitation". The conversation did not remove all their differences but their rapport became cordial and mutually respectful.

Lincoln believed that the most effective way of defeating his enemies was to turn them into friends. He was convinced that respect and kindness were the most effective strategies for defending oneself from violent and even destructive criticism and attacks.

The reader will have noticed the similarity between Lincoln's method and the ideas put forward in Chapter One, regarding kindness as a tool for handling and managing conflict.


[...]


Kindness is a choice and it takes courage to practise it. Because, as we've said at the beginning and do so again here, in the end, kindness is quite different from good manners, politeness and affability. The nature of proper kindness emerges when, in order to practise it,


we have overcome fear, defeat anger and sometimes overcome despair. Making sense. Being human.

To paraphrase a famous remark in an equally famous and much-loved film, we don't act with kindness and courage because it's *cute*. We act with kindness and courage because we are members of the human race. [...]

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