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*Machiavelli against Machiavellianism:
The New “arte dello stato”*

ABSTRACT

A common interpreting perception of Machiavelli’s thought is based on the paradox that state feasibility uses not only knowledge but also any form of immoral act in order to preserve power. Against this position that draws its origin in Meinecke, this paper aims to study the ways that the notion of liberty is interpreted by Machiavelli as well as the impact of this contribution to contemporary policy making. Furthermore, through this study, the diversification between the real Machiavellian contribution to modern thinking and Machiavellianism, will be thoroughly analyzed. The main research question of the paper is to test if the new *arte dello stato* (“art of the state”), in contrast with the notion of Machiavellianism, is based on the new form of rationality which has its roots in naturalism and history, as a precondition for the ruler’s unobstructed action. The methods used include main literature review on Machiavelli as well as content analysis of Machiavelli’s treatise *The Prince* in order to address the research hypothesis that Machiavelli is based on rationality, naturalism and history in order to create a framework of stability, continuity, liberty and prosperity of the people. The main conclusion of the paper is that Machiavelli’s *The Prince* seems to posit a notion of the state operating around the ruler against fortune within a political regime of homogenization, in which the ruler represents the pole of stability and rationality by rolling out a long-term conservation strategy in accordance with the social reality that surrounds him. Thus, his thinking inaugurates the democratic pragmatism of modernity which was later deepened by the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Key words: Machiavellianism, art of the state, liberty, rationality

INTRODUCTION

One of the common interpreting perceptions of Machiavelli's thought is based on the paradox that state feasibility uses not only knowledge but also any form of immoral act in order to preserve power. Thus, state feasibility legitimizes the means and extreme manifestations of violence in order to achieve state preservation. It commits the vigor of power and its deceit to achieve this purpose. Against this position that draws its origin in Meinecke, we will show that the new *arte dello stato* ("art of the state") is based on the new form of rationality which has its roots in naturalism and history, as a precondition for the ruler's unobstructed action. Machiavelli is a thinker of liberty, which evokes the Machiavellian concept of *virtu*, which refers to the human excellence through which the man responds to opportunities while the world is revealed in the form of *fortuna*, in which the man with *virtu* aims to dominate. In this way, Machiavelli may be seen as the ancestor of the new state rationality, through which the man regulates the diverse competitions that distinguish the political condition.

In a letter to Vettori, Machiavelli calls upon his knowledge of the *arte dello stato*, which was acquired through his long experience of political affairs and the study of history [Coyle 1995: 198]. *The Prince* is its written specification (*arte dello stato*). His invocation highlights the issue of its realistic foundation. Machiavelli wrote against those who imagined and designed ideal states [Machiavelli 2011: 69]. At the same time, he indirectly states his committed intention, which was not followed by any thinker, to establish a new political art. This art does not refer to an ideal of justice. Rather, it seems to be based on the notion of common interest that Machiavelli invokes in relation to self-interest. Regulatory aptitude for the common good is not a natural end of civil society but imposes, as a form of consciousness, that a free regime offers advantages for most of its members while allowing the value of the individual to be recognized, that is to say, freedom.

Our intention is to examine, using content analysis (especially in *The Prince* as well as in *The Discourses*) and analysis of relevant theories, this new political art and its relation to freedom. This presupposes first of all a clarification of how Machiavelli describes the concept of the state and its relation to the bases of its foundation, its conquest and its durability.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF CONQUEST AND FOUNDATION

The first 14 chapters of *The Prince* clearly state that Machiavelli does not conceive the idea of a sovereign, abstract, impersonal, and timeless state. On the contrary, they show that the laws and practices of rulers never go beyond human origin. They know how to fight, restrain and satisfy the appetites, the desires of the conquered majority in order to accept the ruler's reforms. The new ruler is in a complex position

where he needs to erase the original violent conquest from their memories. He must rigorously, deliberately govern, legislate, maintain a strong army to satisfy human desires, and define the randomness of relationships between people who make the political situation competitive and unstable. The state in Machiavelli is a perishable entity that no legal abstraction, such as the concept of sovereignty or the "immorality" of *raison d'état*, can sustain. Its preservation is based on capable and virtuous rulers who benefit from historical necessity.

Our analysis is therefore based on the following premise: the terms of conquest and foundation of the new *arte dello stato* are based on the historical analysis of reality which forms the basis for establishing the main features of the new ruler. This means that the concepts of conquest and foundation in Machiavelli, though distinct, are interrelated. The one is a prerequisite of the other and the two together capture the main features of the new *arte dello stato*. The term "conquest" reflects the analysis of historical reality from which the main features of the Machiavellian foundation of the new ruler will emerge. This requires a quick clarification of the terms "conquest" and "foundation". In *The Prince*, conquest indicates the acquisition of land and glory based on the naturalness of human passions. As Machiavelli [2011: 13] states, "it is very obvious, and no more than natural, for princes to desire to extend their domination, and when they attempt nothing but what they are able to achieve they are applauded, at least not upbraided thereby; but when they are unable to compass it, and yet will be doing, then they are condemned, and indeed not unworthily".

Conquest is therefore an expression of the will for power, a characteristic of all people, but its safety is threatened and questioned by fortune. It belongs to the category of the necessity of human nature, but necessity is at the same time conditional. Therefore, the conquest of states is the result of an act of increasing power (e.g. wars) aimed at expanding hegemony because of violent competitive conflict, poverty or hunger. Thus, with the conquest, policy assumes the characteristics of an act based mainly on external necessity, which imposes the conditions for determining the act of the ruler. It depicts political art as an act of violence that cannot, as such, guarantee a status of permanence. As Machiavelli points out, the conqueror should consider that all the acts of violence should be done at once:

[...] injuries are to be committed all at once, that the last being the less, [...] the benefits should be distilled by drops, that the relish may be the greater. Above all, a prince is so to behave himself towards his subjects that neither good fortune nor bad should be able to alter him; for being once assaulted with adversity, you have no time to do mischief; and the good which you do, does you no good, being looked upon as forced, and so no thanks to be due for it. [Machiavelli 2011: 40]

The term "foundation", by contrast, refers to the "true", real policy for the duration of the conquest (we must not forget though that in Machiavelli all these are perishable). Conquest must be expressed as a new conquest, that is, a foundation for

the organization of the political regime that will ensure durability. We could argue that the *status quo* is the dual interpretation of the concept of conquest, that is, the transition from the acquisition of political power to its fundamental reform in order to maintain it.

At the beginning of the new era, Machiavelli mediates the Socratic problem in his own way. That is, rather than defining the art of politics with reference to a transcendent authority, he defines it with reference to history, namely imitating the exemplary acts of the great founders for the establishment of good governance [Machiavelli 2011: 27]. The foundation is a re-conquest, that is, the creation of the city from the beginning and the organization of the political regime. Institution building has its origin in the voluntary act of a wise ruler. The founder is a person who creates laws and institutions in the context of a vague social reality. He seems to take on the characteristics of an architect who wants to structure all the elements to prevent the city from breaking down and not to form a just society and this is the difference with Socrates. Machiavelli declares that “the principal foundations of all states – new, old, or mixed – are good laws and good arms” [Machiavelli 2011: 53].

In Machiavelli, the founder is the person who possesses a “genius ability” [Machiavelli 2011: 53] to introduce laws and institutions capable of defending the city against the corruption, which is inherent in social reality, in order to know when to be authoritarian and when liberal. In the first 14 chapters of *The Prince*, in which Machiavelli unfolds his method of reading history and extracting determinants of the politics of the new state foundation, he seems to define violence as the foundation of its prevalence, but which must be transformed into rational, institutional governance. Authoritarianism is not enough to maintain the state. The harmonious correlation of constituent forces and people is the necessary condition. Machiavelli contemplates the foundation of the state in terms of modern science in order to respond to exceptional situations of its dissolution, to define passions, to appease selfishness, to cultivate virtues, to change morals. He reads the history by highlighting exemplary situations of imitation and avoidance and concludes the chapter on “democratic hegemonies” by stressing that the state can be established in history (as historical reality) only by balancing the opposing forces. As Machiavelli [2011: 58] points out, “that is why a wise ruler must think of a way of governing in which his citizens, always and at all times, have the need of the state and his own, and then they will always be faithful to him”.

NEW ART OF THE STATE (*ARTE DELLO STATO*)

The new *arte dello stato* represents the making of politics as an art of governance and this is the political response to peoples’ deceit, corruption caused by time and the attempt to control the arbitrariness of fortune. It is obvious that Machiavelli is a defender of freedom according to the *verità effettuale* of things. He goes beyond the discussion of classical philosophy on political regimes and replaces it with the

establishment of the state. He rejects the problem of the ancient world and its medieval remains by inaugurating the new political world, the state. This does not mean, of course, that Machiavelli's idea of freedom must be interpreted in accordance with the claims of German idealism and some Marxists. Nor does it have to be considered from the perspective of an individual ethic, according to which the ruler wants to fulfill his personal ambitions. He does not represent a tyrant. A type of ruler in his amoral perfection who brings governance to the technique of exercising power, cut off from morality and religion [Kassirer 1986: 164–180].

Georg Hegel [1974: 135–146] is of the opinion that Machiavelli understood perfectly that the salvation of Italy goes through its integration into a state. He attempts to reinvent a political context without corruption through coercion and the recognition of freedom, that is, Hegel saw in Machiavelli an early conception of the philosophy of history [Lefort 1986: 109]. According to Johann G. Fichte, against the optimistic notion of the enlightenment about human nature, Machiavelli sets up the state to control the essentially evil nature of humans, giving it a task or a function of peace. In this way, Fichte categorizes *The Prince* in a universal view of history, through which events assume meaning and freedom is defined as the regulated and rational expression of people [Fichte 1981: 56].

Based on a Marxist and democratic perspective, Antonio Gramsci challenges Machiavelli's romantic interpretation, linking the emancipation of the people and the making of history with the social dynamics of the working class and the political role reserved by deterministic historical progress [Lefort 1986: 250]. In this way, *The Prince* is addressed to those who do not know how to rule. It expresses the new type of political leader that emerges from historical conditions, such as *condottieri*¹ who are against the nobles and the clergy. This means that *The Prince* is a political exemplary text that concerns not only the political leader of the Renaissance but also the 20th-century Ruler Party. A party that embodies the unified revolutionary social forces that drive history.

But we must not forget that interpreters of the philosophy of history (committed to their own beliefs), study Machiavelli in order to justify their own arguments. Machiavelli's own text does not provide sufficient evidence of the philosophy of history because the future of history is invisible. The ruler is not responsible for transcending history but for establishing the present and preserving the state in the near future. Violence is the birthplace of politics, but its constant repression destroys politics. That is why it is constituted as an authority recognized and obeyed by the here and now (*hic et nunc*). The new hegemony, then, is born in extremely adverse conditions, due to the "virtue" of the ruler and the discontent of the people. Its preservation requires the virtuous ruler to rationalize politics, to enact laws taking into account the morals and functioning of religion, thereby educating the public to respect it. He therefore

¹ They were Italian captains contracted to command mercenary services during the Middle Ages and multinational armies during the early modern period.

institutes a regime of fragile freedom under the conditions of new political ethics [Berlin 1972: 149–206] which can hardly be interpreted as apologizing for the new tyranny of the 20th century [Aron 1993]. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli seems to remain neutral in the face of tyranny, but in *The Discourses* he opines that it is a regime that eliminates freedom. In case of tyranny everything is new but introduced with brutal means and against all the rules of human and Christian life. “The citizen is transformed into a beast of burden of the king in order to keep his power” [Machiavelli 2003: 26]. In *The Prince*, the reference to the tyrant Nabis indicates more strongly the necessity of people support than the legitimacy of the tyranny through the people (in Chapter 9 of *The Prince* he is referred as a Ruler, while in *The Discourses* [Book 1 Chapter 40], as a tyrant). In this sense, therefore, the term “tyranny” is absent in *The Prince* because power (the new ruler) is endowed with a social base and the ruler governs with due regard for the interests of the people (in Chapter 9 of *The Prince* Machiavelli responds indirectly to tyranny).

Machiavelli’s thought is an attempt to break with the traditional discourse on classical philosophy and Christianity, according to which political wisdom was associated with moral perfection and moderation. As Leo Strauss [1958: 29] points out, it is fundamentally distinguished from the classical model of virtue as being between the two opposing passions. Therefore, in contrast to the Aristotelian ethics of inner affinity, Machiavelli is focused on the external (in the historical context); on the ability to be established and recognized by others. It is not the result of this moral rational choice but the logic of the new ruler is shaped by the necessity of events (those before him) and it has an ethical ambiguity that sometimes forces the ruler to do evil [Machiavelli 2011: 78] against a few but good for many. He rejects the humanist tradition and makes virtue conditional on the political normalization of historical conditions to maintain the state. Virtue is thus a combination of knowledge of the present conditions, of human nature and the behaviors it introduces that aim to satisfy the interests of many for a decent and safe life. Thus, Machiavelli’s notion of virtue seems to embody the characteristics of an invention which tends to reflect the practical reason of the ruler who wants to be closer to the *verità effettuale* of political elements in order to maintain the state. It is clear that in Chapter 15 of *The Prince* Machiavelli expresses an Aristotelian wisdom but adapts it in the new historical context and on the basis that man is intrinsically evil.

Hannah Arendt has highlighted this crucial dimension of the reflection of Machiavellian thought which considers the prince’s act as a prerequisite for state endurance. Machiavelli is a thinker of action, that is, freedom, which creates the necessary conditions of human life and this is emphasized by the concept of *virtus*. As Arendt states,

[...] freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna*. Its meaning is best rendered by “virtuosity”, that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts

of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it. The virtuoso-ship of Machiavelli's *virtù* somehow reminds us of the fact, although Machiavelli hardly knew it, that the Greeks always used such metaphors as flute-playing, dancing, healing, and seafaring to distinguish political from other activities, that is, that they drew their analogies from those arts in which virtuosity of performance is decisive. [Arendt 1961: 153]

Machiavelli, through the act of the ruler, highlights political freedom, namely the ability to shape a new reality that is transformed into a set of man-made institutions to transcend the fragile events. Freedom of action is an instrument that constantly refers to the political background in which it evolves. It is based on the indeterminacy of political factors and the need for action to define them. The act of the ruler, unique and extraordinary (that is, his freedom), tends to constantly re-establish the association of forces in order to delay the decline. Machiavelli's ruler seems to be a combination of the charismatic Moses and the heroic form of Cyrus [Machiavelli 2011: 23], who as the founders "do not seem to have received anything from fortune but occasion and opportunity, in introducing what forms of government they pleased; and as without that occasion the greatness of their courage had never been known, so had not they been magnanimous, and taken hold of it, that occasion would have happened in vain" [Machiavelli 2011: 23].

CONCLUSIONS

Machiavelli's *The Prince* seems to posit a notion of the state operating around the ruler against fortune within a political regime of homogenization, in which the ruler represents the pole of stability and rationality by rolling out a long-term conservation strategy always within the social reality that surrounds him. This means that Machiavelli is distinguished from the theories of *raison d'état* according to which the ruler governs as he pleases in order to maintain power. Machiavelli's ruler therefore sets the new *arte dello stato* as a combination of the conquest of political power and conservation, the recognition of the virtue of the exceptional leader who expresses the conflict between *virtu* and *fortuna*. It is the political formula of a new form of ruler that captures the computational reason of modern science to design the unexpected and to dominate it, to predict the inevitable and to limit its catastrophic consequences. In Chapters 2–12 of *The Prince*, virtue is the driving force of the art of governance. He defines virtue and its diverse manifestations to show that most events depend on it. That is, virtue is the human ability, the dexterity, to achieve a goal, to modify the facts, to anticipate, in its decision and in practice, the consequences of *fortuna* in order to prevent destruction. The art of war denotes the word of virtue in the establishment of the politician, and the art of peace denotes the word of virtue through which power acquires a social basis

capable of resisting fate. Chapters 15–25 of *The Prince* illustrate how the negative act of war is transformed into a positive art of governance. In other words, in these chapters the art of the ruler seeks to induce citizens to participate in the foundation and defense of the state. It is a picture of the new ruler who constantly seeks to ensure the free obedience of the citizens. The ruler does not seek to balance the opposing forces of the social body as a *libre arbitre* but relies on the power of the larger body, the people themselves. Machiavelli's political man acts through the years without ever becoming an exclusive creator of history. He establishes the state by respecting the principles of Roman Republic without succumbing to the *raison d'état* demands that nullify Machiavelli's modernity. His thinking inaugurates the democratic pragmatism of modernity which will be deepened by the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

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