

THE MACHIAVELLIAN REVOLUTION¹

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Abstract. *The study proposes a new reading of an intriguing character, a Florentine clerk who revolutionized political culture and became the most problematic thinker of his times. This is the starting point from which the “Machiavellian revolution” is synthetically interpreted in four ways: a. A deep analysis of the conceptual sphere of the political elements and factors, which involves the examination of a series of fundamental concepts: power, political subject, interest, domination, hegemony, virtù etc.; b. a reinterpretation of the classical texts of political philosophy from a new perspective; c. a new perception on the political praxis, in terms of the possible strategies and of the distinction between the public and the private sphere and d. a reconstruction of the political theory in the spirit of the Renaissance anthropology. Therefore the study selects and presents the key cultural and theoretical aspects that support these observations and further them open to interpretation.*

Keywords: *Machiavelli, Machiavellian revolution, power, political realm, domination.*

A Controversial Character

Niccolò Machiavelli, son of Bernardo, a modest clerk of Florence, dies June 22, 1527, in his house situated in Oltr’Arno neighbourhood, aged 58. About a couple of weeks earlier, he made a last attempt to return to his former position, Secretary of the Ten, but he was to receive only two votes.

This ended his earthly adventure of the Florentine clerk, esteemed by the few who knew of his intelligence and appreciated his talent, ignored by the greater number who did not have the opportunity to read his insightful pages contained in the writings entitled *De principatibus (Il Principe*, in Italian, published only in 1532) or those from *Comments on the First Decade of Titus Livy*² (*Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, 1531), both printed only posthumously, or to know the subtle diplomatic reports that he sent on the occasion of each of his

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² And here also, as in the fragmentary translations from the works of Machiavelli included in the volume *Fundamentele gândirii politice moderne*, coord. Adrian-Paul Iliescu, Emanuel-Mihail Socaciu, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1999, I have chosen to translate *Discorsi...* by *Comentaries...* for this is the authentic meaning of

missions to the rulers of Florence at that time and which remained, of course, closed away in the governmental files. However, the fantastic adventure of the *character* Machiavelli began. Machiavelli, the author of several books, simultaneously detested by some and highly regarded by others was a character who seemed, for the English cardinal Reginald Pole, to be a sort of secretary to Antichrist, in so many words, he being the one who, through his *The Prince* (a true Gospel of Satan, the prelate thought), inspired the political actions of Henry VIII. Nevertheless, at the same time, Machiavelli inspired Louis Machon to write the *Apologie pour Machiavel*, a book written at the suggestion of Cardinal Richelieu, and where passages from the work of the Florentine Secretary are placed next to passages from the Gospels³. Obviously, an author who arouses such extreme reactions is in no sense an ordinary character. His work was to be translated into numerous foreign languages and resulted in a number of different commentaries, a number hard to determine precisely. If the true doctrine remained an object of debate among specialists, what was attributed to him as his doctrine aroused the passions and his name was soon to be transformed into a noun: *Machiavellianism* (in Romanian culture there is also a double for this term, a derivative evoking the East and the subtleties of its politics: a term employed by the Romanian writer Ioan Luca Caragiale, a master, among others, of the Eastern-like farcical political turmoil, *machiaverlicuri*).

This interesting character, whose writings are nowadays just as pertinent as in the day that they were printed for the first time, is the initiator of a true revolution in the way we understand the political realm. If we are speaking at present about a *Copernican revolution*, by which we mean the radical change of perspective on nature that Copernicus brings about through his writing in 1543 of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium libri VI*⁴, it is probably just as justified to speak about a Machiavellian revolution, considering the enormous influence that the writings of the Florentine Secretary had, directly or indirectly, through reading or rather through the reaction to what was presupposed to be his point of view. We have already quoted two extreme positions – for their picaresque quality; but posterity read Machiavelli's works in many other ways, though, never with indifference. During the 16th century, the century of the religious wars, the Jesuits saw in his writings a 'breviary of Reform', while for the Protestants the author of *The Prince* is the Jesuit par excellence⁵. As Claude Lefort writes in a paper dedicated to the critical memory of the Florentine author, "Machiavelli is himself the object of a universal hatred, denounced as heretic, atheist, or Mohammedan, and he is charged with all crimes (...). The most famous of his adversaries, the Huguenot Gentillet, accuses him of "despising Our Lord, perfidy, sodomy, tyranny, cruelty, robbery, foreign mores and other detestable vices."⁶

the Machiavellian title, which comes, etymologically, from *discorrere*. In Romanian, the term corresponding to the Italian *discorso*, *discurs*, produces a reduction of meaning, which tends too abruptly to a rhetorical speciality, inappropriate to the Machiavellian text: and this seems to be the case with the English term "discourse", too.

³ Cf. Peter S. Donaldson, *Machiavelli and the Mystery of State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, ch. 1, "Machiavelli and Antichrist" and ch. 6, "Biblical Machiavellism".

⁴ Copernicus, *Des Révolutions des orbés célestes*, introduction, traduction et notes par A. Koyré, Paris, 1934.

⁵ Claude Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel*, Gallimard, coll. Tel, 1986, p. 79.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

However, often, the polemic against Machiavelli is just the pretext to debate with those who, allegedly, were his ideological followers: though Gentillet intended to denounce Machiavelli in front of the organizers of the night of Saint Bartholomew; others invoked him only to be able to open new ideological fronts. “During the 16th century,” writes Lefort, “the mainsprings of polemics are changing according to circumstances, so that Machiavellianism was to be mixed up, time after time, with each of the ideologies that occupy the foreground of history, so that they mobilize against them a part of public opinion: it is the same with Anglicanism, Calvinism, with atheism, with Tacitism, with Jesuitism, with Gallicanism, with Averroism; he is, according to the phrase of Tommasini, ‘what events created and what the passions dreamt.’ The character Machiavelli, seen through the dark kaleidoscope of the Machiavellianism, impersonates one after another the monstrous figures of the evil.”⁷

A psychological explanation imposes itself, within this context: to denounce Machiavellianism is subordinate to, for the most people, a more subtle denunciation, that of the *political realm, and its matters*, in general. Just as Freud, at the beginning of the 20th century, was denounced for pornography because he showed the important place that the erotic drives have in the life of the spirit, similarly, Machiavelli, analyst of politics and political matters outside the area of influence of any ideological or religious subordination, was condemned for freeing the dangerous reality of the political matters from the golden cage of morals and religion. It was comforting, for the most part of people, to believe that the unpredictable force of political matters, with its main elements – power, lawfulness, domination, hegemony, etc. – is subject to social control through religion and morals. Any tyranny, any abuse, any political crime, thus became an improbable exception.

Machiavelli noticed though that the art of governing – governance – involved neither a reference to divine will, nor the recourse to traditional morality, but only a higher consciousness of the intended purpose as well as of the available means. Abstract like a problem in a game of chess⁸, the exercise of power is indifferent to adherence to divine laws or to an appeal to the distance between vice and virtue. This Machiavellian position seemed for many people to be infinitely provocative, acting as to dissolve for the very idea of sociality, inciting a return to bestiality, to a world of wild beasts, which tear each other apart (in fact, that Hobbes unquestionably starts from this Machiavellian suggestion when he proclaims the reality of the war of all against all).

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The Machiavellian revolution⁹ can be approached as a synthesis of four directions, which presuppose: *a*. A deep analysis of the conceptual sphere of the

⁷ Claude Lefort, *op. cit.*, p. 79-80.

⁸ In *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1946), E. Cassirer wrote: “Machiavelli studied and analysed political evolution in the same spirit in which Galileo studied, a century later, the falling of the bodies” (p. 136), adding: “His book exercised (...) a direct influence, a very strong one, on the development of modern philosophical thought. For he was the first, who, in a deliberate and indisputable manner, parted the ways with the entire scholastic tradition. He destroyed the corner stone of this tradition: the hierarchical system.” (p. 135).

⁹ We have to mention the fact that the term of Machiavellian revolution is used by Quentin Skinner, too, in his book *Machiavelli*, indicating especially the relationship of Machiavelli with the culture of his time. Cf. Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli*, Bucharest, Editura Arc, 2001, p. 37 sq.

political elements and factors, which involves the development of a series of fundamental concepts: power, political subject, interest, domination, hegemony, *virtù* etc.; *b.* a reinterpretation of the classical texts of political philosophy in a new perspective¹⁰; *c.* a new perception of the political praxis, in terms of the possible strategies and of the distinction between the public and the private sphere and *d.* a reconstruction of the political theory in the spirit of Renaissance anthropology. In the following sections we are going to present some suggestions on how to develop these observations.

The Machiavellian Analysis of the Political Realm

Numerous studies concerning the Machiavellian work have shown that the Florentine author has a number of insights that anticipate the later analyses of the great theoreticians of the political realm from Thomas Hobbes to Max Weber and Carl Schmitt. Ernst Cassirer has emphasised this novelty in the epistemic order brought about by Machiavelli's work, showing that the author of *The Prince* is situated in a much more complex theoretical position than that of medieval Aristotelianism: instead of looking for casual relations within the field of political phenomena, Machiavelli judges rather in terms of structures and models or in terms of historical analogies (this takes place especially in *Discorsi*). It is true that his task is significantly eased – Cassirer appreciates – by the appearance of new historical forms and of a series of new historical situations. Machiavelli's fascination for Caesar Borgia thus becomes intelligible: "He is not only interested but downright captivated and fascinated. We feel this powerful and strange fascination in everything that is said about Caesar Borgia (...). This fact is not intelligible unless we realize that the object of Machiavelli's admiration is not the man as such, but the *structure of the new state* that he created"¹¹.

His concept of *virtù*, which expresses so well the essence of the political thought of Machiavelli (yet, not that of "Machiavellianism"!) is, in this respect, particularly significant.

A New Way of Reading the Classics

In what concerns the relation of Machiavelli's work with classical culture, some very interesting observations have been made, some negative, such as the ones that found in Leo Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli*¹², Strauss being an author for whom the Florentine is "a teacher of evil."¹³ This fact becomes obvious, maintains Leo Strauss, if – instead of looking from the present-day Machiavelli toward his epoch – "we are going to see him starting from a premodern point of

¹⁰ Barbara J. Godorecci has dedicated a book to this perspective of interpretation devoted to the Machiavellian work entitled *After Machiavelli. "Rewriting" and the "Hermeneutic Attitude"*, West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1993.

¹¹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, p. 133 (our emphasis).

¹² Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, Paperback, 1978.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

view to glance upon an unexpected and surprising, new and peculiar Machiavelli (...).¹⁴ The novelty of thought is introduced surreptitiously, as the case goes (according to Leo Strauss) concomitantly with the chapter 15 of *The Prince* (the chapter where Machiavelli does not quote diverse authorities from Greek and Latin classical culture, preferring to deal with the facts themselves. Here appears the famous expression: *la verità effettuale della cosa*¹⁵ (the effective genuineness of the facts/things). In its substance, the terrible secret of Machiavelli's doctrine is, in Strauss's view, the profound conviction that "man is by his nature evil": "His discovery is implicit in the principle that we have to take into consideration the manner in which people are behaving and not the manner in which they ought to behave, or that we should consider that man is bad by nature, in other words, to consider the prepolitical or sub-political roots of society, or to take into account what was indicated by the following phrase: "an entirely new prince in an entirely new state" (...)."

The teaching that is derived from this principle is obviously contrary to that of classical political philosophy or to the lessons conveyed by the Socratic tradition. The almost complete "silence of Machiavelli in what concerns the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle or that of the political philosopher Cicero, not to mention the Scholastic, adequately expresses this state of affairs (...). For him, the representative par excellence for the classical political philosophy is Xenophon, whose writings he mentions far more often than those of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero taken together (...)"¹⁶. An interesting justification of this fact by Leo Strauss is this following one: "At the same time, Xenophon is the author that, according to Machiavelli, who got the closest to anticipating the point of view which is found in the Prince. *Hiero* of Xenophon is a defence of tyranny that became a classic provided by a wise-man (a philosopher, a paladin) and *Cyropaedia* describes the manner in which the aristocracy might be transformed, by the lowering of moral standards, into an absolute monarchy ruling over a vast empire."¹⁷

Leo Strauss calls the attention to a new way of reading that Machiavelli introduced in relation to the understanding of the historical work of Titus Livy: "Livy unveils an important truth especially through the silence kept on the subject"¹⁸ (the example mentioned by Strauss is the fact that Titus Livy does not mention the role of money in waging wars). Similarly, argues Leo Strauss, we ourselves should adopt a new practice in reading Machiavelli, paying attention to whatever he never mentions¹⁹.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *De principatibus*, ch. XV, "De his rebus quibus homines et praesertim principes laudantur aut vituperantur", in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, Sansoni Editore, 1992, p. 280.

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-291.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 291.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Here is the commentary of Claude Lefort: "From here on we can already catch a glimpse of the principle. We should recognize the signs that lead us toward what-it-is-not-said (*vers le non-dit*). What-it-is-not-said is the thought fully reflected upon by the thinker, but concealed, or, to be rigorous, half-way concealed, reserved for the sagacity of the researcher or for the complicity of the one who allowed himself to be seduced." (Claude Lefort, *op. cit.*, p. 272)

In fact, things are more complicated than they appear in the commentary provided by Leo Strauss. It is certain that Machiavelli adopts new techniques in reading the classics²⁰; or, at least, in reading certain classical authors. His new techniques – fundamentally the method of searching for similar historical situations in order to compare them and in order to deduce from these comparisons certain more general conclusions concerning the essential structures of political realities, human nature, etc. – are appropriate, by their very nature, with regard to a specific genre of classical writings, and especially to historical writings: Polybius, Titus Livy. This is the reason why the dialogues of Plato or the Aristotelian treatises do not impress him much.

In this respect, it is not the lack of adherence to Plato or to Socrates, but the methodological lack of adequacy that prevents Machiavelli from discussing the problems of political philosophy raised by the author of *The Republic*. These are not quite translatable into the structural and situational language in which the book *Discorsi* is written.

Machiavelli and the Concept of Raison d'État

An example of this kind is represented by the topic developed from the suggestions of Machiavelli's work for the school of thought known as the reason of the state, or *raison d'état*; and within this wider framework also appears the question raised for the reading of Machiavelli under the generic title of *arcana imperii*²¹.

The school of the *raison d'état* includes a series of theoreticians of political praxis who start, in general, from the themes approached by Machiavelli in his writings, but who do not accept of his ultimate conclusions. (In this way, the directions identified above at points *b.* and *c.* intersect). The literature concerning the *raison d'état* is vast, starting with Giovanni Botero who provides the very name for this school of thought, and including the historians of political ideas Giuseppe Ferrari, Friederich Meinecke, Rodolfo de Mattei, but also, more recently, Etienne Thuau, William Church, Peter S. Donaldson, Gianfranco Borelli, etc.

Within the specialized literature it is claimed that the notion expressed as *raison d'état*²² appears as such for the first time²³ in the writings of the Jesuite Giovanni Botero (born at Bene, in Piemont, in 1544, and deceased at June 23,

²⁰ In relation to the complex relationship of Machiavelli to antique culture, see also Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and the Romans*, Uppsala University Press, Uppsala, 1996.

²¹ For a general presentation of the subject, we recommend Peter S. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, where are listed also the fundamental works and where the reader will find also extended bibliographical references. Within the present context, this topic is interesting as a developer of a specific type of reading the classics, introduced by Machiavelli, but which is prolonged into the 16th and 17th centuries within the interpretations of the doctrine of the *raison d'état*.

²² In what regards this subject, see also Ion Goian, "Rațiunea de stat – un concept al filosofiei politice" ["Raison d'état – A Concept of Political Philosophy"], in the volume *Gândirea politică ieri și azi*, Bucharest, Editura Institutului de Teorie Socială, 2000, pp. 19-28. We are restating here a part of the points of view expressed in this study, cited above.

²³ We should notice that Prélôt and Lescuyer, in *Histoire des idées politiques*, call the attention to the fact that in Guicciardini is present the expression *ragione e uso degli Stati*, "reason and (its) use by the state" (cf. Prélôt and Lescuyer, *Histoire des idées politiques*, Paris, Editions Dalloz, 1992, p. 158).

1617, at Torino) entitled *Della Ragion di Stato libri dieci(...) di Giovanni Botero Benese(...)* – *The Reason of state (in) Ten Books (...)* by Giovanni Botero Benese (...) – and whose first edition was issued by the printing house Gioliti of Venice, in 1589. As proof of the unparalleled echo recorded by this book is the fact that it was published in two editions in the same year of the *editio princeps* (the second edition is enriched by the *Three Books on the Causes of the Increase and Glory of the Cities*, which anticipates in its title something of what would later on be captured by the theoretical work of Montesquieu).

The success belongs not as much to Botero's book, so much as to the topic raised. Botero has the merit to propose a notion, *raison d'état*, which comes just in time, not only for political philosophy, but also for the politicians. The notion of *raison d'état*, analyzed from multiple perspectives, was to become one of the fundamental concepts of premodern political philosophy, but the same notion was to be invoked by statesmen of the stature of Richelieu as a convenient alibi for the necessity of ignoring the laws of the Christian ethic that could not have been declared, yet, obsolete, within the context of an art of governance freed for the most part from the imperatives of religion.

From the point of view of political practice, the Boterian discourse proposes a series of innovations. The most important among these is that he does not situate his investigation at a level of generality in the manner of philosophy, but remains within the framework of an applied approach, appropriate for the analysis of the political mechanisms, of the interplay of causes and effects, within the field of the art of governance.

This is what we could call an anti-Plato approach par excellence applied to the realities of political. As we easily recall, Plato required in *The Republic* either that the wise men should become kings or that the kings should become wise. This motif is going to be repeated during the Renaissance. Most of the princes were right to see in this kind of philosophy an indirect denial of their kingship.

Botero, as we have already shown, was writing as if situated between two worlds: a feudal world, that dawns with the extinguishing of the religious wars in France and a new world, of royal absolutism, which was looking out for more suitable theoretical justifications and for a specific style in the exercise of power.

Along with the Renaissance though, symbolic power is no longer exclusively in the hands of the Church, which leaves a certain room for manoeuvre for contesting the prince's power in the name of what was called in that epoch the system of *virtues*, a resurrection of the ideas of political philosophy from antiquity. The Prince should be not wise, as Plato required, but virtuous, or better put, should excel in virtue, in Italian, *virtù*, in that quite special meaning attained by the notion in that epoch. Virtue is the foundation, in this respect, of the authority of the Prince, as well as Botero writes: "The first and most important foundation of each state is the obedience that the subjects owe to their superiors and this subjection is established on the basis of the virtue of the prince, for as the elements being and the bodies that are made from this being subject themselves entirely to the movements of the celestial spheres because of their noble nature and the skies among them subject to one another, the lower ones to the higher, so the peoples too are willingly subjected to the prince, in whom virtue

especially shines, for none will resist whoever is superior to him, but rather to one inferior or to his equal.”²⁴

The matter of the *virtue* of the prince was uncompromisingly stated by Machiavelli, who defines this notion in a very different manner from the sort of neo-Aristotelian manner encountered in the previous quote from Botero’s work. For Machiavelli, the prince’s virtue is the exceptional capacity to mobilize all energies, his or these of his compatriots, stimulated by the use of force or of cunning alike to pursue the unique aim of the preservation of the state. At all times, the virtue of the prince, according to Machiavelli, is to be the representative of the state, and of the reason of the state (*raison d’état*).

Indeed, through the idea of the *raison d’état*, one can very well define the relation of theoretical adversity between Botero and Machiavelli. For the Florentine Secretary the virtue that best expresses the essence of the art of governance is *energy*, while at the Savoian Jesuite it is *civil prudence*, understood with the particular meaning that this notion has in the writings of Botero and that is summarized this way by an important student of the Boterian work, Gianfranco Borelli: “Briefly put, the Boterian proposal to characterize *raison d’état* stays in the functions assured by political prudence: this is the essential element with a propulsive role for politics, the activity which tends to become autonomous in relation to all the other spheres (...). *Raison d’état* consists, in fact, in the dynamic techniques implemented by the prudential capacities concerning the maximum rationalization of the subjective commend; the main end of the political preservation, avoiding provoking *novelty*, is to transform permanent conflict in peace and stability, the original antagonisms belonging to the contexts where it [novelty] is applied; only in the cases of extreme difficulty in the exercise of authority will force be applied, if necessary, which has to remain always available, structured and manifest.”²⁵

Botero, as we noticed, does not raise in his work the question of finding the theoretical foundations of the best possible state. For instance, he does not offer, as does Hobbes, the principles of a social pact. His intention, pretty similar to that of the Machiavellian treaty on principalities, is to offer to the prince (to the *Christian* prince) a treatise about the *art of governance*. If Hobbes deduces his political philosophy from his ontology, attempting to build a science of political phenomena, Botero considers, like Machiavelli, that one can speak only *a posteriori* about political phenomenon, making appeal not solely to one’s own experience, but also to the historical experience of humanity. For this reason, in the dedication of his book, *Della Ragion di Stato*, a dedication addressed to the archbishop of Salzburg, Wolfgang Theodoric, Botero quotes two essential sources for his writing: Machiavelli and Tacitus, “the first for providing precepts concerning leadership and the creation of the laws that govern the peoples; the other for the

²⁴ Giovanni Botero, *Della Ragion di Stato*, a cura di Luigi Firpo, Torino, Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1943, p. 69.

²⁵ Gianfranco Borelli, “Introduzione al progetto di ricerca”, in *Teoria e storia della ragion di Stato*, Quaderno I, *Prudenza civile, bene comune, guerra giusta. Percorsi della ragion di Stato tra Seicento e Settecento*, Napoli, Adarte, 1999.

manner in which he described in a very lively style the means (in the Italian text, *le arti*) used by emperor Tiberius to acquire and to maintain his rule over the Roman Empire.”²⁶

An example in reading the classics: arcana imperii

The reference to Tiberius is frequent in this epoch and evokes the theme, already mentioned, of the mysteries of governance (*arcana imperii*, in Latin). The theme, although apparently marginal, is important in order to better understand the circulation of the Machiavellian ideas during the 16th and the 17th centuries. The source of the expression *arcana imperii* is found in the *Annals* of Tacitus (II, 36): the passage evokes a debate between Asinius Gallus and the Emperor Tiberius concerning the election of the candidates for Praetura. The proposal of Gallus to choose candidates for many years ahead meets the strong objections raised by Tiberius, founded on secret calculations about manoeuvring of the political partisans. “Undoubtedly, comments Tacitus, the proposal had an ulterior interest, attempting to grasp the Emperor’s thought and to unveil something from the *mysteries of power* (*haud dubium erat sententiam altius penetrare et arcana imperii temptari*).”²⁷

This expression was to go a long way during the epoch of Machiavelli, helped by the Florentine author himself, who, in a passage from *The Prince* suggests that there is a secret art of governance, recalling the lessons that Chiron the Centaur gave to Achilles²⁸: A prince, writes Machiavelli, must know well how to use the fighting style of the beast and that of man. “This fact was conveyed in a covert and symbolic manner (*copertamente*) by the antique writers; they write how Achilles and many other princes from the old times were entrusted to Chiron, the centaur, to receive learning from him. What is to say nothing else but that is recommended to have as a teacher a character half beast and half man, and that a prince should know to use the one as well as the other of the two parts from which he is formed; for one without the other cannot endure”²⁹. This Machiavellian passage was read afterwards as an allusion to the existence of a secret art of governance and the fact that Giovanni Botero mentions the passage above from Tacitus concerning *arcana imperii* came to strengthen this idea. Other authors who were components of the School of *raison d’état* continued to develop the Machiavellian suggestion of a secret science of the princes (or, same thing, of a secret art of governance). Obviously, the idea was extremely convenient, especially within the Jesuit environment, for the Jesuits attempted to propose

²⁶ Giovanni Botero, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁷ Tacitus, *Annales*, II, 36.

²⁸ *De principatibus*, chapter 18: “Pertanto, a uno principe è necessario sapere bene usare la bestia e l’uomo. Questa parte è suta insegnata a’ principi copertamente dagli antichi scrittori; li quali scrivono come Achille e molti altri di quelli principi antichi furono dati a nutrire a Chirone centauro, che sotto la sua disciplina li custodissi. Il che non vuol dire altro, avere per precettore uno mezzo bestiae mezzo uomo, se non che bisogna a uno principe usare l’una e l’altra natura; e l’una senza l’altra non è durabile” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. cit., p. 283).

²⁹ *De principatibus*, ch. 18 “Quomodo fides a principibus sit servanda”, Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. cit., p. 283.

themselves to the princes as counsellors in confessional matters and, as much as possible, in matters of governance as well. For this reason, the Machiavellian suggestion is frequently commented upon throughout the 16th century, especially in the School of *raison d'état*. "...the authors which belong to the School of *raison d'état*", writes Peter S. Donaldson, "almost always reject the amorality of Machiavelli and, at a certain point in their discourse, accept the more traditional idea of the subordination of political theory toward the moral or religious principles. (...) They are trying to prove that a certain relaxation of the conventional moral restrictions is necessary in the political life, but insist on justifying these exceptions on the basis of the subordination of the individual interests of the state."³⁰

This line of reasoning is followed not only by authors such as Scipione Ammirato or Arnold Clapmar, pertaining to the School of *raison d'état*, but also by other authors not aligned with this orientation, Jean Bodin or John Case³¹. Bodin, in *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (Paris, 1566) deplores the lack of knowledge concerning the old traditions, recalling Machiavelli's contribution, who "was the first, in my opinion who wrote about governance after 1200 years, during which the barbarous demeanor conquered everything."³². After Machiavelli, others wrote, like Patricius (i.e. Francesco Patrizi), Thomas Morus, Rob. Britannus, Garimburtus, who though, shows Bodin, "were not preoccupied with the state but to a smaller extent, and not at all with the imbalances of the states (*nihil de conversionibus imperiorum*), nor with what Aristotle understood by *sophismata* or *kruphia*, and what Tacitus called *arcana imperii*"³³.

Indeed, Aristotle refers in the Book IV of *Politics*³⁴ to what he calls "the oligarchic artifices" and the "counter-artifices of democracies" (*óligarchiké té sophismata*, respectively *demokratiaís prós taut' antisophizontai*) concerning the payment (the attribution of a *misthos*) to the poor who take part in the works of the Assembly of the People (*Ecclesia*) or of the Courts, or, on the contrary, the refusal to fine the affluent men who do not participate (to earn this way the relative majority easily, manipulating the number of those present and of those absent). A synonym for these instances of "political sophism" appears to be the term *kruphia*, "disguises, secretes" – thus, with reference to the tactician of *arcana imperii*.

During the 16th century, some of the authors that we have already quoted want to believe that these notions refer to a secret science (or art) of governance destined since Antiquity to remain unwritten (the famous *ágraphoi nómoi*³⁵). Even more, this secret art of governance, allows certain transgressions of the norms of the current morals, by the very fact that it is the law of elite. Arnold Clapmar, interested in the esoteric tradition which was very popular during the Renaissance, contributed a lot to spreading these points of view. The notoriety

³⁰ Peter S. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

³¹ I am following in this respect the information included in the work of Peter S. Donaldson (especially chapter 4).

³² Quoted *apud* Peter S. Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³³ The Latin text is quoted in a note by Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

³³ The Latin text is quoted in a note by Donaldson, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

³⁴ Aristoteles, *Politikon*, 1297a; Aristote, *Politique*, livres III et IV, Paris, Editions Belles Lettres, 1989, p. 175.

³⁵ On this subject, *agraphos nomos* appears as an expression of divine justice. See also Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV, 4, 5-25, Sophocles, *Oed. Tyr.*, 863-871 etc.

of the diabolical character that surrounded Machiavelli might be also the result of the agitation around the idea of *arcana imperii*, the Florentine Secretary being perceived as the owner of a secret art of manipulating princes.

A note on Machiavellian anthropology

About the last point among those mentioned as identifying the key aspects of a Machiavellian revolution in political philosophy, it is obvious that some of the most renewing aspects of Machiavellian political thought refer to his approach to human nature and its place in politics. By insisting on this idea, any author risks knocking on opened doors. We have already quoted Leo Strauss's point of view, who identifies the Machiavellian negative anthropology the first and the most important count against the author of *The Prince* and of the *Commentaries on the First decade of Titus Livy*. In fact, we can wonder if Strauss's observation that Machiavelli starts from the idea of an absolutely corrupt human nature is correct. Machiavelli himself approaches the topic in a more prudent way, insisting – as we have seen, in the quote about Chiron – on the double nature of man (or, maybe, of the *politician*). Leo Strauss seems inclined to attribute to Machiavelli a theological point of view on man, offering human nature as univocal a characterization, as it is definitive. Machiavelli, on the contrary, suggests that from nature man is neither definitively good, nor entirely bad, and, in fact, these characterizations are rather inadequate in relation to nature; they could be evoked only in relation to man as social being, *id est* with *political man*. They concern the *public* aspect and not the private one of the human being. There is not a *natural* inclination toward good or toward the evil; greed, fear, cowardice etc. are but answers to social (political) situations.

All the *political art* of the prince is summed up in understanding this fact and in the manoeuvring of the political situations in line with this truth. Should the prince rather be loved or rather be feared? The famous problem from chapter 17 of *The Prince* is characteristic of the perspective adopted by Machiavelli. It is preferable, says the Florentine author, to be feared than to be loved, because love creates an obligation for another, while fear is the feeling that leads to the preservation of one's person. Between the obligation for another and the sense of self-preservation, the latter is stronger. To translate this into modern instrumental terms, the prince may press one of two buttons: one that awakens fear in the other, or another, which produces the feeling of obligation. Which one is it more appropriate to press in order to ensure greater safety in terms of getting to the desired result? The answer, in the light of the things presented above, presents itself naturally. The philosophical (or theological) idea of human nature does not enter into the discussion incidentally. Just as a painter shall never paint "human nature" as such, but a specific person, similarly, the political prince is not going to tackle the philosophical question of human nature, but concrete situations. With an amendment, though: wisdom consists in reducing the diversity of the political situations to a number of situations that are, so to speak, archetypal. In *The Prince*, as well as in *Discorsi...*, this is the Machiavellian approach. We may think, though, that what to a philosopher of political realities

such as Machiavelli is the result of experience and a rational approach, in the case of a political being par excellence, such as the ideal *prince* to whom the Florentine author dreams of sometimes, means the choice of the best option is produced by political instinct. Here is the source of the admiration that Machiavelli expresses for princes such as Caesar Borgia, excelling in *virtù*, favoured by the Goddess Fortuna.

Placing the arguments within this context, one may say that Machiavellian anthropology anticipates, to a certain point, the Hobbesian ideas, but his theoretical position allows for a more subtle understanding of the political realm, not only at the conceptual level, but also at the level of the historical manifestations, that of the *concrete situations*³⁶ we mentioned. Maybe this sense of the concrete, visible also in his literary work, makes of Machiavelli one of the most interesting figures of universal political philosophy.

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³⁶ In a letter to Francesco Vettori, from June 20, 1513, in a couple of instances we encounter a recurring conditional time: *se io fussi il pontefice...* ("if I were the Pope..."), significant for the manner of reasoning at Machiavelli, who cannot cast a lucid glance on things unless placing himself in that concrete situation. Cf. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Lettere a Francesco Vettori e a Francesco Guicciardini*, a cura di Giorgio Inglese, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 1996, pp. 143-146.