MACHIAVELLI AT A CROSSROADS. THE BIRTH OF MODERN THINKING

Abstract: This paper is an attempt of clarification on Machiavelli's place in the History of Philosophy and, more specifically, to reflect on his role in the birth of Modern Thought. Assuming that Machiavelli is an innovator of political philosophy, the question is if he is also a modern thinker. In this paper, I uphold the idea that this controversy happens because Machiavelli positioned himself at a crossroads by taking a tradition (a Roman and, in a certain sense, a Greek one too) and trying to adapt it to a new context: the Florence of the early 16th century. This gave rise to a set of complex, sometimes apparently contradictory ideas, different aspects of which were taken up by some of the 17th century's most important thinkers as Descartes or Spinoza, leading to differing concepts of man's position in relation to the state.

Key words: Citizenship, Individual, History of Modern Philosophy, Machiavelli, Modern Individual, Modern Thought, Political Thought, State.

MAQUIAVELO EN LA ENCRUCIJADA. EL NACIMIENTO DEL PENSAMIENTO MODERNO

Resumen: El presente artículo examina el lugar de Maquiavelo en la Historia de la Filosofía y, de manera más concreta, su papel en el nacimiento del pensamiento moderno. El autor parte del presupuesto de que Maquiavelo es un innovador en Filosofía Política si bien su consideración de pensador moderno puede resultar un tanto polémica. En el presente artículo se presenta esta controversia como un resultado del propio planteamiento maquiavélico que no duda en posicionarse a sí mismo en una encrucijada entre la tradición y el nuevo contexto de la Florencia de inicios del s. XVI. Esta encrucijada da lugar a un conjunto de ideas aparentemente contradictorias que fueron consideradas por algunos pensadores posteriores como Descartes y Spinoza y que condujeron a un replanteamiento de los diferentes conceptos de relación entre el individuo y el estado.

Palabras clave: Ciudadanía, Estado, Historia de la Filosofía moderna, Individuo moderno, Maquiavelo, Pensamiento moderno, Pensamiento político

My aim in writing this article is to clarify Machiavelli's place in the history of philosophy and, more specifically, to reflect on his role in the birth of modern thought[1]. The modernity of Machiavelli is a subject of controversy between the scholars. Viroli and others mantain that Machiavelli is not the founder of the science of politics, but he is better understood in the context of Classic Roman Rhetoric, so he was the restorer of the Roman conception of ´politics. On the other hand, Leo Strauss and others defend the modernity of Machiavelli as the precursor of modern ways of thinking including the modern science[2]. Assuming that Machiavelli is an innovator of political philosophy, the question is if he is also a modern thinker[3]. In this paper, I uphold the idea that this controversy happens because Machiavelli positioned himself at a crossroads by taking a tradition (a Roman and, in a certain sense, a Greek one too) and trying to adapt it to a new context: the Florence of the early 16th century. This gave rise to a set of complex, sometimes apparently contradictory ideas, different aspects of which were taken up by some of the 17th century's most important thinkers, leading to differing concepts of man's position in relation to the state.

Ultimately, what Machiavelli tried to do was to make certain basic features of a Greco-Roman state possible. At the same time, however, he was aware of the emerging strength of the individual, in control of his own destiny. On the one hand, a strong state was needed, since, without it, the individuals that comprised it would be unable to develop. On the other, each person was responsible for his own moral conduct, and his voluntary actions generated a particular dynamics in political events. Modern political reflection grants individuals a central role in politics. In Machiavelli, nonetheless, this did not mean the relinquishment of a state's growth or order. He tried to rethink the concept of a Greco-Roman state, incorporating modern features he had detected, primarily the fact that it is the individual who acts in the world, combating fortune and needing a new moral order to do so. This excluded him from the model offered in philosophy.

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2 A summary of this controversy can been read in James Hankins [2000] pp. 1-13.

3 It is not usual to see Machiavelli simply as a modern thinker (not a modern political thinker). For instance, see Robert Hariman (1989).

This attempt to combine individual interests with the order and wellbeing of the state entails two factors that have come to play a key role in modern thinking: the search for regularities on which to build a political science and the key role of the individual as a source of both knowledge and political action. Although these two factors are presented in Machiavelli as being reconcilable and as both being part of a single way forward, in the 17th century they led to two different ways of understanding the political reality, which can be represented by Spinoza and Descartes.

1. THE HERITAGE THAT RECEIVED MACHIAVELLI

Machiavelli aimed to break away from the traditions of philosophical thought, well aware of the new ideas he had to offer. Consequently, he avoided mentioning philosophers in his works. Plato is mentioned just once (*Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, III, 6)[4] and Aristotle once (*DTL* III, 26). Xenophon is the philosopher whose name comes up the most: once in *The Prince* XIV and six times in *DTL* (II, 2; II, 13; III, 20; III, 22; III, 39). Machiavelli chose a model from the past, seeming to opt for the Roman republic rather than a model from Greek philosophy. However, his failure to mention Plato or Aristotle does not mean that he did not bear them in mind in his political reflections. In fact, Machiavelli seems to have built up a discourse in deliberate contrast to philosophical tradition and, more specifically, to Plato and Aristotle. Machiavelli's general criticism of philosophy is its speculative nature, which for him meant that it was based on imagination. At the beginning of chapter XV of *The Prince,* Machiavelli tries to differentiate his approach from what had been established in philosophy up until that point:

> "It remains now to see what ought to be the rules of conduct for a prince towards subject and friends. And as I know that many have written on this point, I expect I shall be considered presumptuous in mentioning it again, especially as in discussing it I shall depart from the methods of other people. But, it being my intention to write a thing which shall be useful to him who apprehends it, it appears to me more appropriate to follow up the real truth of a matter than the imagination of it"[5].

In contrast with those who dream up political organizations and try to explain how to do things, Machiavelli points to the *realità effetuale* as a means of con-

4 Henceforth *DTL*.

5 The quotes of the machiavellian text are translated from Machiavelli [1998].

structing a useful discourse. That is, a discourse that can serve as a reference for specific political action. Plato, in this sense, is the opposite of Machiavelli. Plato's philosopher king is one who possesses higher moral virtues than the rest and thus has a duty to rule. In contrast, if, according to Machiavelli, political reflection must be based on the *realità effetuale*, it soon becomes evident that ethics are not enough in the exercise of politics. Consequently, when a code of conduct is proposed for a prince, it cannot be based on moral considerations. Since Plato's proposal is limited to an ideal, it is no use in helping to understand a political reality and in influencing it, because doing one's duty means failing as an individual. In the continuation of the extract quoted above, Machiavelli states:

> "…for many have pictured republics and principalities which in fact have never been known or seen, because how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation".

Machiavelli redefines relations between ethics and politics. Plato had tackled these relations in book II of *The Republic*, among other places. The story of Giges' ring, featured in it, shows that men do not stick to morally desirable conduct when they know they go unobserved and thus cannot be punished[6]. According to Plato, the solution to this problem is an education that ensures good moral conduct in all circumstances, particularly in the case of those who hold political power. This education is based on the acquisition of objective knowledge, because only if we know what justice is can we act with justice. Thus it is a question of organizing a system of education where those who are most capable of acquiring this education can do just that, so that they are better able than the rest to organize a *polis* in a fair way. In short, Plato believes that only by uniting virtuous man with a ruler can a just city be achieved. Since virtuous man is also an erudite one, we can understand the statement by Socrates in book V of *The Republic:* i.e., that the evils of a *polis* can only be remedied when philosophers reign in cities or else when those who reign practise philosophy as they should. Political action is therefore linked to integrity for Plato.

Machiavelli does not see this proposal as been applicable in practice, since it is neither based on the political reality nor on human beings. Trying to apply Plato's proposal leads to a paradox: a philosopher can only participate in the politics of an "ideal" city (that is, in association with Plato's objective system of edu-

6 For relations between Machiavelli and Plato regarding the tale of Giges' ring, see Roberto Rodríguez Aramayo, [1999].

cation), but if he really wants to achieve this situation, he should intervene in it[7]. If, on the other hand, our starting point is the *realità effetuale*, then the prince should be advised to be prepared not to be good if necessary. In chapters XV to XVIII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli outlines this new concept of relations between ethics and politics, questioning the philosophical idea of a real desirable change in man brought about by exercising virtues, because he casts doubt on how deep rooted these virtues are[8]. Generally speaking, what we consider to be virtues do not lose this quality. That is, in social terms, what we usually classify as being good remains so, but because they are not "universal" virtues, their validity is limited to specific circumstances. In other words, at a given moment in time it is possible for what we usually consider to be good to not be so. In this sense, a politician must be prepared not just to act in accordance with what is normally regarded as good, but to act in any way, given the limited validity of the common understanding of what is good or bad. In chapter XVII of *The Prince* (and also in *DTL* III, 21), an example is given of the limitation of just bearing in mind the usual moral division between good and bad: Hannibal's cruelty produced the same effects as Scipio's humanity, demonstrating that opposing qualities can lead to the same result.

In consequence, moral virtue should no longer be the principle on which politics are based. Thus while Plato sought a location for the city in keeping with virtue, Machiavelli did not bear virtue in mind when deciding where it should be situated, believing that it should instead meet the human needs of the moment.

In this brief presentation of the differences between Plato and Machiavelli, one factor that I referred to initially has come to the fore: ultimately, if we take into account the real state of things, our starting point must be the individual as the centre of political action and not the state as an original entity. Individuals act as best suits their needs at any given time, relinquishing common codes of ethics. Thus it is no longer a question of an individual adapting to an objective instance (Plato's ideas) but the exercise of autonomous actions (even if those supposed objective moral principles are not completely forgotten). This emergence of the individual is even more evident if we compare Machiavelli not with Plato but with Aristotle[9]. At the beginning of *DTL,* Machiavelli outlines a list of natural things, and cities do not feature among them (*DTL* I, preface). Although states are the central protagonists of history, they are merely the outcome of fate, just as an

7 See Rodríguez Aramayo, *op. cit.* If we go by Popper, we have to agree on the failure of Platonic attempts, because Plato's disciples who intervened in politics in order to reform constitutions often turned into tyrants (Karl Popper, 1971).

8 See Pierre Manent [2001], "Machiavel critique de la philosophie", in *L'enjeu Machiavel*, Senellart, M. & Sfez, G. (eds.), Paris: PUF, 2001, pp. 199-210.

9 See Goffi [2000].

increase in the population might be or the subsequent need to group together for the purposes of protection (*DTL* I.2)[10]. Consequently, it is individuals who seek to form a group, forced by necessity. It is from this point that we can begin to talk about justice in a city as something created by individuals to avoid the harm that they might do to one another. There is not, therefore, a natural quality to good in the Aristotelian sense[11], but instead good and justice are the fruit of human efforts to meet mankind's need[12]s.

One consequence of this difference is the fact that while Aristotle's city (and also Plato's) is based on harmony because Aristotle assumes that human beings have a natural propensity toward good and it is thus a question of organizing the city so that this tendency comes out, Machievelli's city is dominated by conflict: the result of human beings' differing interests. These different interests are the outcome of mankind's wide range of personalities. For Machiavelli, this diversity can be attributed to the division of mankind into *grandi* and *popolo* (*The Prince* IX, *DTL* I, 4; I, 5), where the desire to be above the law contrasts with a restrained attitude and a desire to avoid oppression[13]. The nobility wishes to rule, while the common people do not want to be oppressed, which means that harmony is not possible. Conflict is therefore inevitable and order can only be achieved through careful management. As a result, if the common good is to be achieved, it must be the outcome of careful management of these conflicting interests rather than the result of a fictitious harmony.

In short, the differences I have highlighted among Machiavelli and both most important Greek Philosophers cast doubt on both the universal, natural quality of a moral virtue and the city's ontological priority over individuals. We can therefore understand why Machiavelli chose the Roman republic as his past and not the Greek philosophical tradition. In *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, through references to the history of Rome as recounted by Livy, Machiavelli shows his sympathy for the republican model. The republic is better than principalities or kingdoms in as much as the people are wiser and more constant

10 Although Machiavelli does attribute certain characteristics of living beings to cities (for example, they are mixed bodies that can change and die or remain healthy) (*DTL* III, 1). This brings to mind Aristotle's statement that a city belongs to a class of compound things (*Po.* III 1,1274b).

11 For Aristotle, the end purpose of a city is to live a good life (*Po.*, III,9,1280b).

12 Upholding the idea of necessity as opposed to virtue is a recurrent theme in Machiavelli, as can be seen by his concept of a just war. For Aristotle, however, if someone holds greater virtue and power, it is noble to follow and obey him, although whether a war is just or not is always determined by virtue (*Politics*, 1325b). For his part, Machiavelli outlines numerous occasions when a decision to go to war is not determined by moral virtues, emphasizing that all necessary wars are just ones. (*The Prince* III, XII, XXI; *DTL* III,12).

13 A difference dependent on the prevailing humour in each individual.

than a prince (*DTL*, I, 58). The republic is ruled by all, and so the common good is sought. In this republic, people are free, which means that citizens possess public property. For Machiavelli, this leads to an increase in both public and private wealth (*DTL*, II, 2) because all citizens can gain access to the highest of positions. At the same time, the equal rights of a republic give rise to equal duties and, more particularly, to a respect for the law and its observance. This model offers other advantages, such as an absence of hereditary problems, shared power among classes, an absence of a lazy aristocracy, and a greater willingness to take to arms to defend a lifestyle that the citizens themselves have opted for.

This model of a Roman republic is extendible to the Aristotelian community and to Plato's republic, insofar as, in all of them, the interests of the individual tie in with the common good. However, Machiavelli is also aware that, despite the uniformity of human nature, which makes it possible to learn from history, the age in which he lives is not the same. No longer can it be maintained that individuals have natural ties with the community or that each individual occupies the place that befits him for the state to work efficiently, because individuals' links with the state stem from necessity and they act and live their lives autonomously. Humans are forced to live in a community, but their humors lead them to act within it by either oppressing others or by trying to avoid being oppressed. Despite this, some elements for a Greek *polis*, like the Roman republic, continues to be desirable and so they must be redesigned on a different anthropological basis. In consequence, the art of politics involves the conservation of a common lifestyle by petty-minded individuals who are not particularly willing to live as a community.

This different anthropological approach can be clearly observed when Machiavelli writes about forms of government. He does it in a way reminiscent of Greek philosophy, because monarchies, aristocracies and democracies tend to degenerate into tyrannies, oligarchies and anarchies respectively, and the latter leads to a monarchy, making the cycle come full circle[14]. This coincidence is lost when attempts are made to offer solutions. Although Plato does not have an optimistic vision of mankind, he is wrong in avoiding realism and taking refuge in an imagined republic. While Aristotle is more realistic, his conception of human beings as a *zoón politikón* is over benevolent. Another concept of human beings is needed. For Machiavelli, man must be regarded as a petty-minded being who only does good out of necessity. With this as a starting point, we must think what conditions are needed for men to support and adhere to the political order. The answer is a mixed system that combines elements of a monarchy, aristocracy and democracy: a system that allows everyone to participate, where rich and poor share political

14 Machiavelli's vision of an Athenian democracy is not very positive: it is an example of degeneration due to the arrogance of the nobility and licentiousness of the people.

positions. Rome is an efficient historical example of this combination and so it is logical for Machiavelli to have used the history of Rome as a reference rather than the political reflections of Plato and Aristotle.

The challenge faced by Machiavelli was not to relinquish the republican model, despite any incursion into the realm of possessive individualism or modern liberalism, because only this model can efficiently combine individual interests with collective ones. The Greek republican model, termed developmental republicanism by Held, emphasizes the intrinsic importance of political participation in more efficient decision-making and citizens' greater development[15]. In this sense, political participation can be tied in with a virtuous life. The true reality of things showed Machiavelli that individuals do not conform to this idea, and so he proposed an alternative inspired by the history of Rome (termed protective republicanism by Held), which insists on the instrumental value of political participation in order to uphold citizens' interests. Whatever the case, the reality of the 16th century was not the same as that of Rome. The Republic, in Machiavelli's Florence, was fragile and that fragility was precisely attributable to the fact that it could no longer be deemed the realm of the community but that of the individual[16]. Individual interests mean that the given order can change at any time, but freedom, for Machiavelli, only occurs within a state and so individuals must participate in political life and thus conserve their freedom in order to defend themselves from the corruption that is always on hand.

2. DERIVATIONS OF MACHIAVELLI

Thus Machiavelli's alternative was to try and adapt the ideals of a *polis*, attempting to apply the Roman model to a new context, combining elements of political theory from the ancient world with the political reality of his time. For the Roman republic to serve as a model, the relationship between past and present had to be posed. That is, it was necessary to justify resorting to history as a means of analysing the present. Machiavelli must have assumed that, with the exception of any differences between different moments in time, human nature remains unchanging. This assumption facilitates the detection of regularities in human behaviour and the establishment of behavioural guidelines for rulers. Machiavelli's method, based on history and examples, aims to determine these regularities insofar as it is possible, and so any contextual differences are not insuperable.

15 D. Held [2006].
16 See J. Pocock [2003].

Machiavelli is taking a big step in the direction of political science, in the sense that politics is presented to the analyst as something that can be rationalized (even though it is not completely foreseeable). The concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna* are used by Machiavelli as methodological instruments for the definition of guidelines (rather than laws)[17]. Fortune represents everything that escapes human control, without entering into the question of whether the origin is divine or attributable to fate. Nevertheless, absolute control over Fortune would preclude the presence of regularities[18]. Machiavelli's assumption that human nature is invariable and so history – with the exception of any contextual differences – repeats itself can only be maintained if Fortune can be counteracted by an instance that limits its power and generates repetition. This instance is virtue, which is simply an attempt to dominate Fortune and thus control events by anticipating them. Foresight can be both possible and effective if we regard history as a receptacle of examples of virtue. Although Fortune exists and cannot be totally overcome, the virtue of great men must be analysed, because through this analysis we will be able to set guidelines that ensure successful political action through the repetition of desirable events. Each situation can be tackled in several alternate ways (Machiavelli normally reduces them to two opposing ones), and one is shown to be a better experience. Providing that human nature remains constant, even though the context might change, guidelines can be established based on paths chosen in the past in similar situations to the current one. Thus virtue is the driving force behind history, leading to the existence of political science (*The Prince* XX), even though this science is based on an analysis of specific individuals: those who overcome fate through their capacity to transform it into an opportunity to achieve their goals (*The Prince* VI).

The search for regularities in order to rationalize politics and the attempt to minimize the role of Fortune lead Machiavelli to highlight the importance of the individual, who acts freely and rationally, generating history and making it possible for analysts to draw up guidelines on political behaviour. These are the seeds of modern man: individuals engaged in political action. Machiavelli's work is directed at them and they are the basis on which political reflection is built. The search for regularities revolves around one concept, virtue, which Machiavelli first applied to individuals (and only in second place to collectives). Indeed, by associating virtue with the political individual, Machiavelli is forced to redefine it. The conception

17 The interpretation of Machiavelli that I am explaining here owes a lot to Philippe Desan's view on Machiavelli [1987].

18 In his *History of Italy,* Guicciardini, a contemporary of Machiavelli, rejects the existence of a method that can be used to explain human knowledge and he lends considerable importance to Fortune, to which man is vulnerable.

of the virtue in the period of Machiavelli is an adaptation of the ciceronian virtue to the Christian religion, a conception in which the virtuous behavior is ultimately tied with the acceptance of good or bad fortune. Within this context, *The Prince* represented a changing use of the concept of virtue. The moral code of Machiavelli's age ignored the individual, and so a need was posed for a moral complement that could be applied to human actions, in their specific earthly facet[19]. Machiavelli started out from the typical assumption of the Renaissance thinker that individuals have power over their own destiny. Thus a moral complement was needed that would allow them to behave freely without being subject to social *decorum* and without submitting passively to Fortune. In other words, a pragmatic variable code of ethics was needed, depending on the circumstances[20]. In short, codes of conduct in political life could not be based on Roman social *decorum* or Christian ethics, but on a moral code centred on the individual. This code would be a personal, contemplative one that varied according to the situation, and individuals would be in charge of their own destinies, struggling to dominate Fortune so that as many actions as possible were born of their own initiatives.

However, for Machiavelli, political reflection was not merely reduced to the virtuous individual. Instead, as formerly indicated and demonstrated in the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, it had to encompass reflection on the state. Nonetheless, insofar as the individual is the creator of his own virtue, we are no longer in the realm of the community, but in that of the individual. Dialogue with the past helps to recall the success of community ethics; experience of present things reaffirms individual ethics. Let me repeat that Machiavelli tried to combine the modern individual with the Greco-Roman community and individual success with justice (a social value), using a method that links past events with present ones.

In the 17th century, there were two different offshoots to these two aspects of Machiavelli's thinking, one focused on the attempt to found a political science and the other directed at upholding the individual as one in charge of his own fate. The first, the best known of the two, leads us to Spinoza and the second to Descartes.

Leaving aside the well known reference to Machiavelli in chapter 5 of Spinoza's *Political Treatise*, where he advocates an ironic reading of *The Prince*[21], in

19 Philippe Desan [1987] developed this idea brilliantly.

20 At the time that Machiavelli was writing, the incompatibility of this moral complement with Christian ethics had still not been empirically proven. Only after the night of the Saint Bartholomew massacre in Paris (1572) did some Protestant writers, like Gentillet or Hotman, begin to consider *The Prince* as being incompatible with Christian ethics.

21 Machiavelli's final message is that the salvation of the multitude should not be entrusted to just one person. I am quoting the works of Spinoza from the edition by Gebhardt [1972], using the established way of doing it (work, chapter, page and lines). Spinoza. B. [1972].

the same work the Amsterdam philosopher develops two aspects of Machiavelli's work: the attempt to eliminate Fortune and the search for regularities, based on the idea that the individual and his objectives fall under the more general scope of the laws of nature. If nature can be subject to laws, then man – in his capacity as part of nature – can also be. This then represents Fortune's total defeat: a defeat that had only been semi achieved in Machiavelli. At the beginning of the first chapter, a criticism is made of philosophers who believe that passions are vices to which men freely succumb, and the fact that these philosophers extol 'a human nature as is nowhere to be found' (*TP*1, 273, 15-16), while condemning in their writing 'that which, in fact, exists' (*TP*1, 273, 17). Spinoza, on the other hand, attempts "not to lament or execrate but to understand human actions" (*TP*1, 274, 28-29). Thus his understanding of human nature is based on a study of cases, insofar as there is no man not necessarily subject to passions, and so "we must not therefore look to proofs of reason for the causes and natural bases of dominion but derive them from the general nature or position of mankind" (*TP*1, 276, 2-6).

So much is this so that Spinoza's understanding of the natural right with which so many theorists were familiar is as follows: "man does nothing save in accordance with the laws and rules of nature, that is by natural right" (*TP*2, 277, 3-6). Natural right is thus defined by tendencies that cause men to act, and acts are natural effects, whether they are born of reason or not (this last option being much more widely accepted). It is at this point that Spinoza famously attacks those who "believe that the ignorant rather disturb than follow the course of nature as one dominion within another" (*TP*2, 273, 31-34), which he firmly disbelieves. However, although man can do nothing against "that eternal decree of God, which is written in universal nature" (TP2, 264, 7-8), reason teaches him within a state to be pious and to maintain a benevolent soul.

Consequently, man acts in accordance with the laws of his own nature and seeks what is useful to him. Like Machiavelli, then, Spinoza starts out by assuming the existence of a human nature, with specific laws, but each individual (and this is one of the cornerstones of modernity) chooses his own objectives at his own criteria. Nonetheless, if, in the case of Machiavelli, reconciling individual freedom with law means acknowledging that not everything is dependent on determination, in the case of Spinoza this reconciliation occurs through reason, which leads man to uphold suitable ideas and thus be like his fellow men. When men are stirred by passion, they have different temperaments, Spinoza says. When, in contrast, they are guided by reason, they consider what is essential in human nature and, by extension, identical to all human beings (*Ethics* XXX). In this way, Spinoza tried to culminate Machiavelli's attempt to unite the two aforementioned factors but he abandoned the Greco-Roman model completely. Spinoza acknowledged Machiavelli to be a rationalist thinker who analyzed the forces behind a city, insist-

ing that individual virtue is a fundamental condition for a state. That is, only free virtuous individuals can give rise to a free regime[22].

The other offshoot of Machiavelli's thinking is one that I will exemplify through Descartes. Descartes is well known for being unwilling to write about politics, perhaps because, for him, politics and philosophy were not just different activities but two far removed ones. The conditions needed for cultivating reason were not political ones[23]. Philosophers were like Ghibellines to Guelphs and Guelphs to Ghibellines. As a result, Descartes' maxim *Bene vixit, bene qui latuit* is no surprise[24]. Thus if Elizabeth of Bohemia had not insisted, Descartes would not have made any comment on Machiavelli's two key works, and even so, he presents his thoughts as *divertissements*. Before summarizing Descartes' opinion of them, we must refresh our memories of the dialogue between Descartes and the princess in previous letters, especially on the subject of Fortune. Motivated by Elizabeth's long illness, Descartes acknowledges Fortune's obstinacy in pursuing the princess' family, but he reminds her that great souls are distinguished from common ones by doing everything they can to make Fortune shine on them (letter to Elizabeth of May 18th 1645; AT IV, letter CCCLXXV, 200-204)[25]. Great souls therefore wish to conquer Fortune and neutralize its power over them. In this respect, Descartes seems to have something in common with Machiavelli. In another letter, Descartes suggests that, as a maxim for happiness, we must remain outside Fortune's scope of influence, making the most of the opportunities if offers but not considering ourselves unfortunate if it denies us these chances (AT IV, letter CDXLV, 492). Fortune's defeat and virtue's triumph occur because there is never a lack of willingness to undertake all those things one considers best (*Treatise on the Passions*, part 3, art. CLXXX; AT XI, 446). Descartes aimed to overcome the same Fortune that kept rearing its head time and time again for Machiavelli. However, Fortune's defeat does not occur in the realm of events, but in that of thought. Through controlling something that is strictly ours - our thoughts –, virtue can be acquired.

In commenting on *The Prince*, Descartes oscillates between the efficiency of political action and the maintenance of ethical principles. He agrees, for instance, that the prince should always avoid arousing popular hatred. But he doesn't like

22 See Bertrand Dejardin [2003], Epilogue.

23 See Cicero Araujo [1994].

24 He lives well who is well hidden. Maybe Descartes had Montaigne's *Essais*, precisely the tenth chapter of the third book, "De menasger sa volonté", in mind. Politics is dominated by the fortune, but in our private life we can make our own fortune. Making politics, for Montaigne, floodgate the danger of going out oneself.

25 I am quoting the works of Descartes from the edition by Adam & Tannery [1971].

the machiavellian conception of good political man and he maintains that the good man is the man who follows the true reason[26]. In the final instance, he believes that politics belongs to the realm of Fortune, insofar as it does not depend exclusively on the autonomous individual. So, it is better leave the politic to the men who are destined for. Descartes thinks that the law is the justice, and therefore we have to submit to it. But the law has to hear the diversity of believes about what the justice is. So, although a prince may make the best possible use of reason and thus make good use of his free will, ultimately we cannot find regularities on which to construct a political science. Politics is intelligible, but it is not rational in the sense that there is no political necessity. Machiavelli acknowledged that not everything is determinable in politics. Descartes shares this idea, not only because Fortune exists, but also because the free, undetermined individual exists. Descartes completes the path initially trod by Machiavelli in search of regularities and the establishment of laws in as much as the individual "constructs" a rational method of acquiring knowledge that allows him to formulate laws that explain the functioning of the world, but by distinguishing between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, he limits this search to the material world and so the autonomous individual, in his capacity as a thinker, remains outside the fringes of the establishment of laws. And although true freedom occurs insofar as individuals act according to reason, they act freely in the sense of not being predetermined, and so it is hard to conduct political science.

In conclusion, both Spinoza and Descartes try, each in his own way, to resolve the Machiavellian conflict generated by the attempt to re-use the Greco-Roman model, integrating the autonomous individual into it. However, in all three cases, the individual becomes the focal point of political action, because it is he who, in one way or another, defeats Fortune. Machiavelli understands, before Descartes and Spinoza, that the end justifies the means, implying that man's only purpose is himself. The modern individual finds himself in a world in which nothing seems given and everything has to be done. He is an individual freed from the constraints of tradition or any external authority. The problem that Machiavelli fails to solve is the fact that individuals' total independence seems to be an impediment for the rational reconstruction of the political domain. Spinoza overcomes this by conserving the freedom to philosophize, which is necessary if men are to organize themselves through reason, and he tends toward the reconciliation of individual self-interests and the law. Descartes, meanwhile, gets round the problem by sustaining that politics cannot be considered unshakable knowledge and so political

26 I agree Theodore Sumberg that Descartes is more sympathetic with Machiavelli than he was clearly stated, but this is a subject for another paper. See Theodore A. Sumberg, [1993] chap. 10.

action does not come under the scope of natural laws, because human action is free. So in politics no single truth can legitimately be established [27].

To finish, I would like to point out that, despite their differences, the proposals of Machiavelli, Spinoza and Descartes tend to coincide in one aspect: all three offer cornerstones on which to build a democratic society[28]. In Machiavelli, the ruler's autonomous free actions must lead to an ordered state with good laws, in which all men participate in government and can thus live freely. In Spinoza, there is political order because the ruling authority grants men the freedom to philosophize, and the state is organized in such a way that its leaders promote the wellbeing of the state during the pursuit of their interests. In Descartes, the freedom of the individual to exercise his reason must be maintained, seeking to take the best possible action at all times. In all three cases, we can thus find a democratic proposal for the organization of a state. Given the central role played by autonomous individuals, the complex process of political analysis leads to the defense of a political system that recognizes, to a certain extent, that truth has not been achieved, allowing individuals to seek it freely[29].

Machiavelli positioned himself at a crossroads, not wanting to stop looking back but conscious at the same time that he was carrying out a task in a new way, still believing in the Greco-Roman state as a model to follow, although the power of the individual in pursuit of his own interests could not be overlooked. Thus Machiavelli imposed a new vision on the past. He exemplifies efforts to contemplate a path that would, in one way or another, later be abandoned, because in regarding the individual as the origin and central focus of political action, he was finally forced to abandon the Greco-Roman model and to consider the relationship between individual interests and the interests of the community. That is, how to organize a community that allows individuals to pursue their interests as they wish, without this being to the detriment of the community as a whole.

JOAN LLUÍS LLINÀS BEGON

27 Machiavelli's influences on Descartes and Spinoza is an example of how an author's ideas are picked up, either directly or indirectly, by other thinkers, who then transmit essential elements of the former's ideas through their influence on a particular geographical area. This was the case in Holland. The influence of this notion of the individual on ideas concerning tolerance and the coexistence of different sects in the Low Countries, via the Cartesian philosophy that many thinkers conserved during the second half of the 17th century in Holland, was immense, but this issue goes beyond the boundaries of this article.

28 I can not develop this question here, so it would be needed a full article.

29 In this respect, the modern proposal ties in better with the Roman republic than with the proposals of Plato or Aristotle. Thus Machiavelli chooses it as his past and leaves aside Plato and Aristotle's ideas, even though they share the same basic intention.

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