

PANAGIOTIS NOUTSOS

ABOUT MACHIAVELLI AGAIN

I follow, as closely as possible, the international bibliography which makes its appearance year by year on the subject of the work of Niccolò Machiavelli. This is made possible by means of the electronic data bases held by the Library of the University of Ioannina (particularly: 'The Philosopher's Index' and 'Humanities International Index'). The relevant encoded messages then lead you to hundreds of 'conventional' and electronic journals to which our Foundation is a subscriber, or to the practice of 'inter-library lending'. In this way, in recent months I have had the opportunity to access individual focuses of *problématique* which are put forward as arising from Machiavelli's work, in packaging of older and new 'minting'. Thus, apart from the issue of the Ethics or the 'anatomy of the city', in comparison, moreover, with the Aristotelian formulations, there is a demarcation of 'Business Ethics', 'comic ethos', 'the phenomenology of public communication' and the cognate 'ritual', 'democratic governance' and the 'postmodern prince', 'the art of power', 'aesthetic political theory', 'sex and the subject', '*tumulti*' and the present-day '*multitudo*', not forgetting the interpolation of the policy pursued by Barack Obama.

From this long-term practice, I keep active, an extra factor so that it should not sink into abstraction without historical backing¹, Fichte's advice: "The period in which our author lived: here is a fact which, if we are going to judge him, we must never lose sight of".² Furthermore, and without in this connection

1. See on this Panagiotis Noutsos, *Πώς η ιστορία γίνεται παρελθόν* [How history becomes the past], Ellinika Grammata, Athens 2009, pp. 33-36.

2. J.G. Fichte, 'Über Machiavelli als Schriftsteller und Stellen aus seinen Schriften' [1807], *Werke*, I.H. Fichte (ed.), XI, Berlin 1971, p. 405.



contenting myself with some ‘descriptive meta-level’, I share the apt insight of Kondylis: “a lack of historical training is the inexhaustible source of inspiration for philosophers”³. I do not exempt from this observation the bibliography of all the ‘zones’ of production of the European researchers who must have transformed - in line with Nietzsche’s diagnosis⁴ - history into their ‘sixth sense’.

In any event, if we really are faced with the author of the “thought of action”⁵, the historical environment in which Machiavelli’s ideas were brought to birth and at the same time thematised, at least on the yoking together of political planning and the philosophy of history, cannot be ignored: that is, that this was the working hypothesis and, consequently, the subject of my monograph on him, both in its first and in its second edition⁶. A specific methodological behaviour, which I have termed ‘historico-critical’⁷, suggests precisely the critical weighing of historical ‘data’, on the criterion of a documented framework of theoretical principles, and the historical understanding of the ideas which make their appearance and pursue their career on the stage of post-feudal European society. And in this approach to research, which posits in each instance⁸ Machiavelli’s thought *in statu*

3. Panagiotis Kondylis, ‘Στοχασμοί και αποφθέγματα [Reflections and apophthegms]’, trans. L. Larelis, *Nea Estia*, issue 1717, Nov. 1999, pp. 493-4, here p. 495.

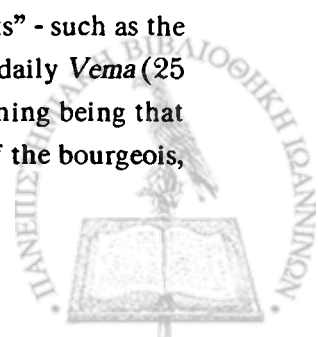
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* [1886], *Werke*, G. Colli - M. Montinari (eds), VI2, Berlin 1968, p. 164.

5. Louis Althusser, *L’avenir dure longtemps*, Stock IMEC, Paris 1992, pp. 488, 493. Cf. P. Noutsos, *Κόμβοι στη συζήτηση για το έθνος [Nodal points in the debate on the nation]*, Ellinika Grammata, Athens 2006, p. 306.

6. P. Noutsos, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Πολιτικός σχεδιασμός και φιλοσοφία της ιστορίας [Niccolò Machiavelli. Political planning and philosophy of history]*, Daidalos / I. Zacharopoulos, Athens 1983, 2001.

7. P. Noutsos, *Niccolò Machiavelli*, 2001, p. 185.

8. See also P. Noutsos, ‘Το κοινωνικό συμβόλαιο του ... Μακιαβέλι [The social contract of ... Machiavelli]’, *To Vema* newspaper, 20.1.2002. This text had the following as a presupposition: nothing, of course, prepared us for what appeared in ‘Nees Epoches’ (23 April 2000) in the same newspaper: “All states, the Italian writer says, are divided into two opposing groups, the ‘people’ and the ‘great’ (who always include the rich, a fact that Marxists” - such as the present writer - “overlook”). A clarification issued from the same pen, in the daily *Vema* (25 April 2000), to the effect that this had been so worded “in error”, the meaning being that “they overlook the importance of this fact: that Machiavelli is no friend of the bourgeois,



nascendi, his own testimony, under constant scrutiny, is held to be helpful. In following a path which “no one has yet trodden”, he took it for granted that he would derive from this “distress and difficulty”, and, perhaps, the moral satisfaction that he had been innovative in a field which it was essential to explore with “more analytic power and judgement”⁹.

And this without the elevation of history into “*maestra delle azioni nostra*” - that it urges you to ‘experiment’ (‘experimentation’ as a process, not as a completed result) on the historical material which can be gathered together - ever having been hauled down. Something similar to the possibility of “weaving the warp” of “chance” without being able to “break” it (“*e non rompergli*”) and “not to sit with our arms folded”¹⁰.

And so what end is served by the historical examples, the ‘cyclical’ view of history, and the acceptance of historical necessity? The functional linking of these forms of approach to the past, as this will be practised on a daily basis by the ruler and his advisers, makes possible historical forecasting. Is a specific viewpoint for evaluating events which makes Machiavelli a theoretician of the ‘modern state’ formed in this way? In this package of lines of thinking which are formulated in his work, what is, supposedly, the ‘gravitational centre’ in what is sketched, with ‘characterological’ qualities of an ideal type, as the “moment of the foundation of the state”, whatever ‘correspondence’ is attempted to be discovered between the ‘word’ and the ‘concept’ of ‘state’?

as he is often believed to have been.” I myself have in fact had the unsought-for opportunity to see again, entirely specifically, on what pages of my book *Niccolò Machiavelli. Πολιτικός σχεδιασμός και φιλοσοφία της ιστορίας* (Athens 1983) I “overlook”, supposedly, that “always”, in Machiavelli’s thought, the “rich” are included among the “great”. I hasten, moreover, to go one step further, perhaps from a fear of encouraging the reader of the newspaper, “Marxist” or otherwise, in an ‘external’ power game of certain “opposing groups”, to have it clarified precisely what Machiavelli means by the terms ‘people’ and ‘the great’, drawing exclusively upon the analyses of my book (pp. 15-16, 33, 67-69, 79-81, 132- 133), with the intention that the antithesis between them should be grasped within the historical environment which was formed and at the same time thematised by the Florentine writer.

9. N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* [1513-1521], *Tutte le opere, op. cit.*, Sansoni, Florence 1971, p. 76.

10. Machiavelli, ‘Del modo di trattare i popoli della Valdichiana ribellati’ [1503], *Tutte le opere, op. cit.*, p. 14; *Discorsi, op. cit.*, pp. 189/190. Cf. Noutsos, *Πώς η ιστορία ... op. cit.*, p. 180.



Can we consign the ‘state-form’ to what is evaluated as ‘literary research’, which would have to deal with the “first moment of its concept”, even by “migrating from the tragedy of Aeschylus to the political writings” of Machiavelli? And how are we to avert the ‘digestion’ of the work by the “peptic juices of the contexts”, so that we can be referred back “more systematically” to the “terms which carry the concept” of the “great explosion” during the “common experience of the birth of bourgeois society”? Or how are we to approach ‘*virtù*’ as a ‘portmanteau-concept’, and chiefly in the “act of political morphodosia” which constitutes the “founding act of the morphodosia of the state”? And if this happens, will “the subject-state, the state as the ideal capitalist, peep out”, thus permitting the “theory to gain self-confidence only” as a “theory of the state”?¹¹

To be completely specific¹², in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, in the period in which Niccolò Machiavelli (1469 - 1527) was writing, the processes leading to the constituting of the nation-states of Western Europe (France, England, Spain) were already visible. With the development of the pre-industrial (or commercial) bourgeois class - more rational division of labour in mass industrial production, multiplication of the products of the manufacturing economy, and the prospering of ocean-going trade - the reinforcement of the central royal power had kept in step with the joint effort to weaken the local feudal houses (which by their privileges and their tolls were obstructing the expansion of the national market). Moreover, after the discovery of the ‘New World’ and the repeated expeditions of the Europeans to bleed its wealth, the Mediterranean ceased to concentrate their main commercial activity, and with the precious metals which they brought, movable capital (by means of the form of commercial companies) increased and there was a rapid rise in prices.

The effect of these events on Machiavelli’s homeland was immediate and crucial. Here where its cities were involved chiefly in Eastern trade (which diminished after the fall of Constantinople), their early development had depended on the feudal hinterland, and their banking system had suspended

11. Dionysis Gravaris, ‘Ο Ν. Μακιαβέλι (1469 - 1527) και η στιγμή της ίδρυσης του κράτους [N. Machiavelli (1469-1527) and the moment of the founding of the state]’, *Axiologika*, 23, May 2010, pp. 7-35.

12. See also Noutsos, *N. Machiavelli*, ²2001, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-195.



the productive investment of capital. The micro-political conflicts of the city-states of Italy, the 'worldly' ambitions of the Pope, the frequent intervention of the foreign powers, and the bankruptcy of the banks had set the seal on its long-term regression. Of course, in Machiavelli's birthplace (where since the late Middle Ages 'guilds' had flourished, there had been multiple social upheavals between the '*popolo minuto*' and the '*popolo grasso*', and two party political formations had taken shape with a differing foreign policy), a form of democratic governance, which he himself served, had become a permanence.

When Machiavelli withdrew temporarily from active political involvement on the dissolution of Florentine democracy by the Spanish, who re-introduced into the governance of Tuscany in 1512 the '*signoria Medicea*', he found the leisure at San Casciano to process his experience into theory. Thus he produced *The Prince* (1513), which he dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici (the '*duca d' Urbino*'), and began the *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, which was completed in 1521. The central idea of the former work, which established him in political philosophy as a front-line writer, in conjunction with the principal positions of the *Discourses* and with certain points in the rest of his works, is that the prince (as he is imagined by Machiavelli gaining power by legitimate and illegitimate means) will unite Italy and will liberate it from the "barbarians". These two objectives, which are organically linked to one another, form the programme of the specific political activity which Machiavelli proposes to the leadership of his fragmented homeland.

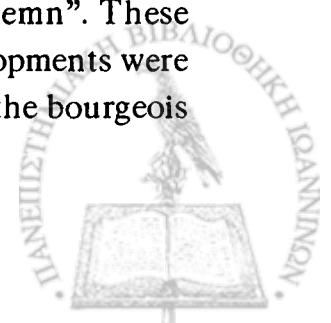
In his own age, the uniting of Italy and its liberation from the 'barbarians' were not the ideological weapon of the ruling class in his country. The higher bourgeois strata in the Italian cities - that is, the bankers and the owners of commercial capital whose activities were not only at sea, but also in the agricultural hinterland - had a cosmopolitan mentality. From this point of view, the planning of Machiavelli was probably the 'utopia' of the petit bourgeois strata, who - following the tradition of the Ghibellines - sought after the state unity of their native land.

Machiavelli was of the opinion that "in every state there are two opposing tendencies, one of the people and one of the great (*grandi*)" and that the opposition between them is to be explained by that fact that human beings are born evil. The primary legal act presents itself with the birth of organised society, when, that is, the "*invidiosa natura*" of the individual is set aside by the 'contract' which he has signed in order to ensure collective co-existence. 'Natural life' has no knowledge of law, which is the creation of the history



of organised societies. In this way the theory of the ‘social contract’ is used by Machiavelli, who saw that the cities of his time developed on the basis of the economic activity of their members and their social claims. “If the laws tend to reconcile the conflicting ambitions of the citizens, this would mean the restriction of their liberty, but also the safeguarding of their (movable and immovable) property and their life.” In Machiavelli’s designs, a ‘contract’ between the ‘prince’ and the ‘people’ which will guarantee the faithful observance of their agreement: an alliance for the uniting and liberation of Italy comes first.

Machiavelli, further, believes that the transgression of the laws and the corruption of men have their root in social inequality. It is not a case only of the ‘evil’ nature of human beings, but of their degeneration in the unjust social conditions which intensify their disputes. The motive of personal interest and the struggle for the acquisition and legal securing of individual property which characterised the economic life of Western ‘proto-urban’ society undoubtedly assisted in the erosion of feudal social pattern, since the abolition of the class privileges of the nobles was required to ensure the unconstrained activity of the self-made bourgeois. Machiavelli was an eyewitness of the social upheavals which began to manifest themselves in the cities of Italy when their inhabitants, with ‘natural law’ as their banner, strove to overturn the social injustice which was overwhelming them. He quotes in his *History of Florence* the following words of a representative of the wool guild (*‘Arte della lana’*): “Nor should that ancient blood which they invoke daunt you, since all men, as they have the same origin, are equally ancient and made by nature in the same way. If all stripped naked, you will see how alike we are, and then let us put on their clothes and they put on ours: without any doubt we will look like nobles and they like men of the people (*ignobili*). For it is only poverty and wealth which divide us.” The author of the *Discourses* believes in the reduction (and not the abolition) of class conflicts by the dynamic intervention of the “balancing” factor in society - the prince. In analysing the conflicts between the Roman “*Nobilità*” and the “*Plebe*”, he observes that “hunger and poverty make men industrious (*industriosi*) and the laws make them good”, and he concludes: “good examples [of *virtù*] are produced by good upbringing, and good upbringing by good laws, and good laws by those disturbances which many thoughtlessly condemn”. These ‘*tumulti*’, as a perpetual hothouse of revolutionary social developments were experienced by Machiavelli at first hand, and, in interpreting the bourgeois



demands of his own time, he required that the “perfect republic (*perfetta repubblica*) should provide for all things by its laws”.

From Machiavelli’s time, commercial, craft industry, and banking recession (the banking system of the Italian cities emerged in the late twelfth century) appeared on the horizon of Italy, with fatal consequences for its economic development. With the primary accumulation of capital, which took place in many Western European countries in modern times, the landowners and the wealthy proto-bourgeois who returned to the countryside drove the farmers forcibly from their land and turned the fields into grazing-grounds. As Thomas More biting notes, “the sheep now have started to be greedy and insatiable, so much so that they devour men themselves, fields, and houses”. Concealed at the root of this process was the flourishing state of mass craft industry production of woollen textiles, initially in Italy and Flanders and later in England, where wool was radically revalued, to become the “foundation and source of English wealth”. In Machiavelli’s homeland, the peasants had been condemned to long-term underdevelopment, since after the abolition of serfdom (*coloni*) they did not achieve the usucapion of the land, but were turned into cheap labour for the needs of the newly-established or developing urban centres. When, however, with the geographical discoveries the commercial importance of the Mediterranean was set aside and the once flourishing cities of central and northern Italy (with the exception of Venice) declined, their ‘aristocracy’ returned to the agricultural countryside, and, moreover, the ‘re-feudalisation’ of social and economic life took place, in conjunction with the Spanish suzerainty (*Spanification*) which maintained it. It was precisely this fact that Francis Bacon had in mind when he wrote that in Italy “the whole population consists of aristocrats and farmers”.

We can identify the economic and cultural Renaissance, as experienced by Machiavelli, in certain cities of central and northern Italy. The early economic activity, from the period of the Crusades, of Genoa, Venice, Padua, and Florence can be seen in the first thrills of capitalism which led to the transient prosperity of the banking system and not to purely productive investments. Thus the Medici of Machiavelli’s birthplace were in a position to lend to the embattled kings of Europe, and the large-scale merchants formed an urban aristocracy (*noblesse de robe*). When the bankers of Florence were ruined and the European money market (with the blessings of Spain and England, which in the end were to have control of it) was transferred to the Netherlands, the negative impacts which reinforced commercial brokerage



capital had on social development became plainly obvious. The retreat of the high bourgeois strata to the countryside, particularly with the ‘Spanification’ of Italy in the late sixteenth century, would make economic and social development dependent on farming and not on the dynamism of the urban centres.

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SUMMARY

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