

Robert von Friedeburg

Political thought in early-modern Europa

Kurseinheit 2:
Machiavelli
The religious clash

kultur- und
sozialwissenschaften

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In his comments of Livy's history of Rome, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) said that 'if men are governed well, they do not look for any other liberty'. To the Machiavelli of the *Discorsi*, this good government was the urban republic. To the Machiavelli of the *Prince*, this was not so clear. When in 1537, a decade after his death, Florentine exiles demanded from duke Alessandro de' Medici the recovery of their *libertates*, they were told by the duke's advisor, Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540), that liberty did not exist where the people suppressed the nobility or government had given way to licence. At a point like this, the ambivalence of core terms like 'liberty' becomes obvious. 'Liberty' could address the normative goal to achieve in living together with others by regulating common affairs, or it could refer to the privileges contested between rich and poor. Similar ambivalences occur in Machiavelli's use of terms like 'virtue'.

In Machiavelli, as in Bruni, the argument on politics was not only shaped by an intimate knowledge of Aristotle, but in particular by Roman history and reflections on the decline of the Roman republic as articulated by Cicero, Livy and Sallust. Like Aristotle, these texts addressed the living-together of citizens in a city run by themselves, but they also discussed the civil wars in Rome and put particular emphasis on virtue not just as a natural condition of citizens, but as a potential that needed to be realized in order to steer the city-state through trouble. The insistence on *amor patriae* as an unconditional commitment to the city stemmed not least from this background. Machiavelli held various offices himself from 1498 to 1512, including recruiting troops in the countryside. After the return of the Medici, he was accused of being part of an anti-Medici conspiracy and incarcerated. Finally released, he resigned from public life and retired to his rural estate, where he wrote his two major texts, *The Prince*, aimed as a piece of advice to the next Medici-successor to rule the once free Florence, and his *Discourses* on Livy (1513-19).

The discrepancy between the republican *Discorsi* and the advice to princely rule is, however, not as great as one might assume. Machiavelli had listened to the sermons of Savonarola, warning the Florentine people against their factionalism and the corruption of particular interest, and had interpreted them as lies told to the people in order to

please the mob. Janet Coleman rightly concludes that Machiavelli's main issue was not to establish a basic dichotomy between monarchies and republics, but between liberties of the political community on the one hand and licence of a ruler on the other. Both provided problems in various sorts of government. In any case, the establishment and defence of just laws had to be squared with the ambitions of people and elites. Both of his works are characterized by a highly elaborated reflection on the problems of political morality as the basis of efficient government. They also attempt to establish, without recourse to any fixed benchmarks of Christian, Platonic or Aristotelian morality, the nature of the good and the aims of government. This makes his work so outstanding. It is also a reason why his *Prince* in particular became despised in England and Germany as a work of atheist immorality, allowing rulers to do whatever they pleased in order to keep power. By the same token, it has made his work specifically popular among political scientists ever since the late nineteenth century, as the first 'modern' text on politics, based on an essentially secular framework.

Indeed, in his *Prince* as well as in his *Discorsi*, Machiavelli insisted that in important decisions to safeguard the republic no attention must be given to what is conventionally seen as just or unjust. Both the prince and the republic are advised on how to defend and improve their 'state' (*stato*) in terms of power, reputation, possessions, alliances, wealth and whatever else may be counted as part of the political property in the widest sense of the term. Note that to identify the term *stato* simply with our sense of public institutional 'state' can lead to substantial misinterpretation. Even in the *Discourses*, primarily concerned with a republican regime, he allows for the need for a strong man enforcing order and laws until current problems, such as factionalism, have been solved, insisting also, however, that laws need to be established that can survive the death of this very strong man. The experience of Florence with its Medici patrons and their varying fortunes provided the background for his extreme realism and his caution against understanding politics as the implementation of political ethics. Thus, the ability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances are understood to be prime qualities of anyone who wants to acquire and keep power, while circumstances beyond one's own direct influence are summarized as fortune. This emphasis is also reflected in Machiavelli's low estimation of mentalities – even a people that once experienced a free life could, after some time of military occupation, be made to endure the

lack of liberty. For while man's nature is fixed, character and preferences are subject to circumstances and thus not only subject to rapid change, but even to intended manipulation.

Machiavelli's writings, and in particular the *Prince*, provided a micro-sociology of power struggles where no single participant had such overwhelming power as to be able to completely ignore the other competitors, and a systematic discussion of the components that need to be analysed and understood for anyone wishing to take part in politics. While this new approach made for a fascinating read for anyone trying to make his way, whether in a town-council or at a court, it is understandable that officially this 'realistic' approach had to be condemned. Theologians pointed to the lack of appreciation of the primary need for any government to follow the laws of God, while anyone supporting the classical program of steadfastness in the face of changing circumstances, such as stoic ethics, would be appalled by Machiavelli's insistence on not only adaptation, but outright imitation and deceit as successful ways to maintain and increase status. Insofar, Machiavelli crowned an emerging tradition informed by, but not *copying*, classical precepts. Classical precepts had suggested steadfastness, but Machiavelli's argument was much more nuanced. His argument was also clearly divorced from any direct submission to Scripture as a prescript. In 1559, his work was put on the index of forbidden books by the papacy. More importantly, the disintegration of the medieval church into competing confessional churches and the resulting religious civil wars proved that one major component in the analysis and understanding of politics had not been part of Machiavelli's account – the dynamics of fundamental religious confrontation and civil war.