

“How we live is so far removed from how we ought to live”: Machiavelli’s contemporaneity

Interviu realizat de Jozef Matula

Jozef Matula: *Niccolò Machiavelli – Italian Renaissance political philosopher and statesman, secretary of the Florentine republic- is a well-known figure in European intellectual history. Niccolò Machiavelli displays the vital mind of the man who wrote the first work of modern political science, The Prince (Il Principe). His most famous work brought him a reputation as an immoral cynic, an intriguer or an unscrupulous schemer. To be “Machiavellian” meant “following the methods recommended by Machiavelli in preferring expediency to morality; practicing duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct; astute, cunning, intriguing” (Oxford English Dictionary). Is Machiavelli’s Prince the archetype of manipulateness, callousness, and indifference to morality, and as Bertrand Russell said “a handbook for gangsters”?*

Georgios Steiris: The relationship between ethics and politics was a major issue among ancient and medieval thinkers. Apart from the ancient Greeks and the Romans, numerous authors from the Sassanid, the Chinese, the Mughal, the

Byzantine and the Arabic milieu articulated their views on the heated subject of the relationship between ethics and politics. Although the predominant view was that the emperor, the prince or the political agent in general should be a virtuous person, and that his rulership should be defined by a set of traditional virtues, the discussion about immorality or amorality in politics was always there, – even as a counter exemplar. In Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Polybius and Plutarch the discussion of political evil is vividly present. If you read these texts inversely, you are in a field similar to that of Machiavelli’s. The reading of Machiavelli’s *Prince* as the archetype of evil, of manipulateness, callousness and indifference to morality, is an old one, albeit not the only one. Namely, Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others, perceived Machiavelli’s ideas in a more or less positive way, and praised the usefulness of his perspective. Machiavelli’s work is definitely not “a handbook of gangsters”. It is a break point in the history of political thought, since within the long tradition of Mirrors of Princes

Machiavelli operated like Oscar Wilde with his *Picture of Dorian Gray*. Machiavelli's prince looks at the mirror and sees his true face, as well as to what extent active engagement in politics transforms his self.

J. M.: *How would you describe Machiavelli's impact on the history of political thought?*

G. S.: In the fifteenth chapter of the *Prince* Machiavelli gives us the impression that he was fully aware of the novelty of his political thought. In spite of the fact that some modern scholars attempted to diminish his novelty, and presented him as a continuator of 15th century humanist politics, the reception of his work proves that people were shocked by his proposal. The impact of his thought is deep and highly influential. First of all, the publication of his works brought forth the discussion about the role and the limits of virtues in everyday politics. Moreover, he opened a frank discussion that lasts. Later thinkers and politicians attempted to interpret his texts in various ways, feeding the scholarly discussion and the public debate. Machiavelli facilitated later thinkers by giving them the opportunity to openly discuss the *arcana imperii*. Rousseau proposed that Machiavelli, while pretending to have given valuable lessons to kings, he in fact educated the people. As a result, the *Prince* is the book of the democrats. For my part, I think that, despite Machiavelli's real intentions, his

ideas disclosed the real nature of politics. Furthermore, Machiavelli triggered a wide discussion among experts about the relation of ethics and politics and the limitations of it.

J. M.: *What do you feel is the most significant aspect of this work (Il Principe)?*

G. S.: The most significant aspect of *The Prince* is the shift toward political empiricism. He states that "It remains now to see what ought to be the rules of conduct for a prince towards subjects 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 the matter than the imagination of it; 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; for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil". Machiavelli was adamant that the political discourse should focus on the question of how politics is conducted and not how it

should be conducted. According to him, the failure of empires and republics was due to the fact that previous political thinkers attempted to answer the wrong question. By neglecting experience, they failed, since the bond between “ought” and “is” is quite fragile’.

J. M.: *Machiavelli’s works are sometimes said to have contributed to the negative connotations of the words politician and politics. What do you think of this opinion?*

G. S.: I think it is an exaggeration. The bad reputation of politics and politicians is an ancient story. Aristophanes, in his comedies, heavily criticized the politicians. Later, Roman comedy writers followed in his footsteps. Even Augustine launched a fervent attack on earthly politics. I would rather say that Machiavelli contributed to the opposite: he showed to people that the political actors could not act differently, if they wanted to succeed and benefit the citizens and the state. The politician should dirty his hands, so as to feed the people. You cannot make a cake without dirtying your hands. As a result, Machiavelli defends the politicians against common claims and beliefs.

J. M.: *What do you think Machiavelli would make of contemporary politics?*

G. S.: I think that Machiavelli would have been disappointed by the

fact that in our days there is a lack of leadership, while political actors, as well as legislation prove the dependence of politics on ethics, which is the main cause of inefficiency in the public sphere. In addition, the foundation of politics upon ethics restrains liberty, which was Machiavelli’s constitutive ideal. I think that Machiavelli would be very anxious about the very survival of the so-called Western World, because, according to him, it is almost impossible to repulse states that do not respect the traditional Western set of rules and virtues by following these rules and virtues. If you want to survive, you have to reply in the same way or to impose on those your own rules and virtues.

J. M.: *Many people talk about Machiavelli’s philosophy as a negative approach to authority or leadership. What do you think about the so-called “amorality” of Machiavelli’s Prince?*

G. S.: I could agree with the term “amoral”, which is more accurate than the term “immoral”. Namely, Machiavelli, in certain parts of his writings, held that the politician, when the situation gets tough, should not care about the set of typical virtues, as it was known and established in the pre-modern world. Following these virtues would be a drag, and would prevent the safeguarding of his *stato*, as well as the welfare of the state. We would say that he was an early positivist,

because he supported the separation of ethics and politics, breaking a tradition of centuries. However, he was not a radical positivist. He admitted that “it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity.... And I know that everyone will confess that it would be most praiseworthy in a prince to exhibit all the above qualities that are considered good”. Being virtuous is necessary for a politician in ordinary situations, but not in extraordinary ones.

J. M.: *How was Machiavelli received and interpreted by Greek thinkers from the 17th century onwards?*

G. S.: According to my knowledge, the first Greek thinker who referred to Machiavelli was the

Patriarch Kallinikos III (+1726). In his *Narratio brevis* Machiavelli and his followers are listed among the evil doers and disciples of Satan. Later Neocles Kazazes (1878), professor of Law at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, commented on the Florentine’s views. Kazazes, while acknowledging Machiavelli’s amorality, thought of Machiavelli as a great patriot, whose main concern was the safeguarding of his *patria*. Kazazes suggested to his audience to read the *Prince* as a political, not an ethical, treatise. The first and foremost duty of the politician is to safeguard and promote the interest of his homeland, despite the cost. In the 20th century the most perspicacious treatise on Machiavelli was written by Panagiotes Kondyles, who largely reproduced Meinecke’s views on the Florentine political thinker.